



## LAUDATO SI' AND MISSION

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No 3

# LAUDATO SI' AND MISSION



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# LAUDATO SI' AND MISSION

ED. BY KLAUS VELLGUTH, WOJCIECH KLUJ OMI & FRANS WIJSEN



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# Preface

KLAUS VELLGUTH

In 2020 the editors of the missiological series “European Mission Studies” invited missiologists and theologians in Europe to contribute to a conference “Laudato si’ and Mission” focussing on the missiological perspective of creation. It was five years after Pope Francis promulgated his encyclical “Laudato si’“. In this encyclical Pope Francis called for a new dialogue on how people shape the planet’s future: “We need a conversation which includes everyone, since the environmental challenge we are undergoing, and its human roots, concern and affect us all.” (LS 14) The missiological conference tried to understand our relation to creation as a *locus theologicus*, read the signs of the time and develop contemporary missiological perspectives. Different aspects were discussed: The historical background of Laudato si’ and mission, Laudato si’ as a challenge for a missionary spirituality, socio-ethical perspectives of Laudato si’ and mission, interdisciplinary and interreligious perspectives of Laudato si’ etc.

Various contributions were deliberately dedicated to the topic of “Laudato si’ and Mission” from an interreligious perspective. In this way, the presentations tied in with the orientation of Laudato si’, in which Pope Francis explicitly wants to address “every human being who dwells on this planet” (LS 3). Unlike previous encyclicals, the papal teaching letter thus deliberately does not address only Christians – or even only Catholics. Pope Francis is broadening the circle of addressees, responding to the fact that the challenge of the environmental crisis, which endangers all life on this planet, knows no religious, denominational or national boundaries and can only be solved as a common challenge for all people. But it is not only with this address that the encyclical Laudato si’ promoted the understanding of the global ecological challenge in a culture- and religion-unifying commitment of people to the preservation of creation. Pope Francis also explicitly encourages a cross-religious alliance in other places, writing: “If we really want to build an ecology that allows

us to rehabilitate all that we have destroyed, then no branch of science and no form of wisdom can be left aside, not even the religious one with its own language” (LS 63). The Pope from Latin America promotes “understanding the planet as a homeland and humanity as a people inhabiting a common house” (LS 164). For the discourse on the question of how the human family can survive in a common *oikos* in the age of the Anthropocene has become a transnational and religion-binding question in the age of globalisation at the latest. In order to survive together, representatives of religious communities must overcome denominational and religious boundaries and engage in an interreligious and intercultural dialogue on the subject of creation. In this sense, Pope Francis took up the encyclical *Fratelli tutti* published a few weeks before the conference “Laudato si’ and Mission” last year in 2020 and in it unfolded the religion-unifying perspective, which he had already touched on five years earlier in *Laudato si’*, as an essential challenge.

The papers which were presented during the conference focused on “The Ecological Concern as a Common Challenge – Muslims and Christians in Indonesia” (Frans Wijisen), “A fraternal humanism as mission to creation? – The holistic perspective of *Laudato si’* and its socio-ethical and missiological consequences” (Thomas Fornet Ponse), “Ecological Conversion and Mission” (Wojciech Kluj), “Historical Background of *Laudato si’* and Mission” (Gerard Moorman), “Indigenous Knowledge in a Mission for Eco-justice – Everything in the world is connected” (Stefan Silber), “Eco-sensitive Answers of the Church in Different Continents with Focus on Africa, Asia and Latin America” (Paul B. Steffen), “Eco-Spiritualities in Dialogue” (Klaus Vellguth) and “Christianity as a Universal Resource among Others? – Creation Faith in an Intercultural and Interreligious Perspective” (Isis Ibrahim). The different presentations included reflections on spirituality of creation, righteousness of creation, creation myths, biblical reflection on creation, different concepts of creation, creation and responsibility, eco-justice, eco-sensitive answers of the church in different continents etc.

The papers which were presented during the conference are published in this volume of “European Mission Studies”. We owe a debt of gratitude to the authors who have contributed to this publication. We hope very much that this latest volume in missiological series will generate interest in the theological discourse within the missiologists not only in Europe and provide fresh ideas on how missiology can be re-thought and realised today and in the future.

# The Ecological Challenge as a Common Concern

## Muslims and Christians in Indonesia

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The Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si'*, 'on care for our common home', promulgated by Pope Francis on 18 June 2015, was received well by scholars and activists, as well as by political and religious leaders.<sup>1</sup> It is likely that it inspired the Islamic Declaration on Climate Change as well.<sup>2</sup> Also the fifth anniversary of the Encyclical stimulated quite some interreligious scholarship on climate change as common concern, both in descriptive and prescriptive ways. For example, on 29-30 October 2020, Georgetown University, Berkeley Centre for Religion, Peace and World Affairs, and Yale Forum for Religion and Ecology, brought together scholars and leaders from various faith communities for a webinar on Interreligious Responses to *Laudato Si'*.<sup>3</sup> In this chapter I focus on Indonesia,

<sup>1</sup> United Nations Environment Program, *Faith for Earth*. Foresight Brief No. 008 (2018-08-02), in: <https://www.unenvironment.org/resources/publication/faith-earth-foresight-brief-no-008> (2020-11-18).

<sup>2</sup> Islamic Declaration on Climate Change, in: [https://www.ifees.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/climate\\_declarationmmwb.pdf](https://www.ifees.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/climate_declarationmmwb.pdf) (2020-11-18). One of the members of the declaration drafting team is a well-known Muslim scholar from Indonesia, Dr Fachruddin Mangunjaya.

<sup>3</sup> *Interreligious Responses to Laudato Si'*. A Fifth Anniversary Celebration and Reaffirmation of Pope Francis' Encyclical on Care of Our Common Home, in: <https://www.unenvironment.org/events/webinar/interreligious-responses-laudato-si> (2020-11-18).

the fourth largest country population-wise, the second largest polluter and the largest Muslim community in the world.<sup>4</sup> I explore some of the existing interfaith practices for environmental conservation and ask what we can learn from them as missiologists.

An early example of such an interfaith practice is the cleaning of Code River by Yusuf Bilyarta Mangunwijaya SJ. In the 1980s ‘Romo [father] Mangun’, as he was popularly called, came up with a project to build a neighbourhood, designed by him, where people could enjoy a calm, serene, and relaxing atmosphere, even though it was bustling with activity. Romo Mangun settled along the Code shore and made an existing home look nice and clean. He shared with the Code shore dwellers, most of whom were Muslims, his knowledge of how to regulate family income and expense. He taught them about morality and ambition. He discussed the design of their houses and the cleaning of the river. In 2010, the Kali Code became a free waste area due to the Code Zero Waste Program.<sup>5</sup>

In this contribution I take three steps. First, I elaborate on Muslim-Christian relationships in Indonesia in general. Second, I explore interreligious initiatives in environmental conservation, both in theory and practice. Third, I draw some lessons for missiology. By missiology, here I mean the theological hermeneutics of missionary practice.<sup>6</sup>

## Interreligious practices in general in Indonesia

Indonesia has had violent clashes between Muslims and Christians, particularly after the resignation of president Muhammad Suharto. During the New Order era (1967-1998), characterised by Suharto’s authoritarian rule, the government controlled the media and the philosophy of national unity was imposed on

<sup>4</sup> F. Jotzo, *Can Indonesia lead on Climate Change?*, in: A. Reid (ed.), *The Repositioning of Asia’s Third Giant*, Singapore 1993.

<sup>5</sup> N. Idham, *Riverbank settlement and humanitarian architecture, the case of Mangunwijaya’s dwellings and 25 years after, Code river, Yogyakarta, Indonesia*, “Journal of Architecture and Urbanism” 42 (2018) p. 177-187. DOI: 10.3846/jau.2018.6900.

<sup>6</sup> R. Schreiter, *The Role of Intercultural Hermeneutics in the Understanding of Mission as Intercultural Studies*, in: E. Uzukwu (ed.), *Mission for Diversity: Exploring Christian Mission in the Contemporary World*, Zürich 2015, p. 29-43.

Indonesian citizens. During the Reformation era, there has been more freedom of speech and decentralisation gave space to radical groups to express themselves.<sup>7</sup> A well-known example is the Maluku Crisis between 1999-2002.<sup>8</sup>

There are, however, also numerous inter-faith initiatives to combat crises. During the Maluku Crisis, among others the Peace Provocateurs and the Women for Peace reduced religious tensions and stimulated harmony. Also after natural disasters, such as the Tsunami in Aceh in 2004 and the mount Merapi eruption in Yogyakarta in 2010, Islamic and Catholic relief services collaborated well. The constitution of Indonesia as a pluralistic state is based on the Pancasila philosophy of unity in diversity. And at independence, the Muslim majority (80%) opted for not having an Islamic state. It respected the rights of Christian minorities for the sake of national unity.

Most of the bigger faith-based organizations such as Nadhlatul Ulama (80 million members) and Muhammadiyah (60 million members) enhance tolerance towards other faiths through their schools and colleges.<sup>9</sup> Also the Catholic and Protestant Churches have interfaith offices that are involved in Muslim – Christian relationships for quite some time.

A driving force behind these initiatives is the Ministry of Religious Affairs in Indonesia. This ministry has been promoting harmony between religious groups since the 1960's, by conducting seminars and conferences for religious leaders about interreligious relations.<sup>10</sup> Also the Special Envoy of the President of the Republic of Indonesia for Inter-faith and Inter-civilization Dialogue and Cooperation continuously spreads the message of peace and harmony.<sup>11</sup> The Indonesian government therefore plays an important role in balancing interreligious relations and avoiding conflicts.

<sup>7</sup> Z. Fuad, *Religious Pluralism in Indonesia Muslim-Christian Discourse*. (Ph.D. dissertation. University of Hamburg) 2007, p. 53-63.

<sup>8</sup> C. Sterkens, *Handi Hadiwianto, From Social to Religious Conflict in Ambon. An Analysis of the Origins of Religiously Inspired Violence*, in: C. Sterkens, M. Machasin, F. Wijzen (eds.) *Religion, Civil Society and Conflict in Indonesia*, Zürich – Berlin 2009.

<sup>9</sup> F. Pohl, *Negotiating Religious and National Identities in Contemporary Indonesian Islamic Education*, "Crosscurrents" 61 (2011) no. 3, p. 401. DOI:10.1111/j.1939-3881.2011.00189.x.

<sup>10</sup> Z. Fuad, *Religious Pluralism in Indonesia*, 63-64.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. *The Jakarta Message*. On the Middle Path for the World Civilization. The 7<sup>th</sup> World Peace Forum. Jakarta 2018.

Besides these examples, there are also numerous Indonesian nongovernmental organisations and institutes that promote interreligious practices in Indonesia. Examples are Interfidei, an Institute for Inter-Faith Dialogue with a Protestant background, established in 1992, and Madia, a Society for Interreligious Dialogue, which was founded by activists from various religious backgrounds in 1996.<sup>12</sup> Other examples are the Wahid Institute operating within Nadhlatul Ulama and the Maarif Institute operating within Muhammadiyah. Both institutes advocate moderate and progressive forms of Islam. According to Van Bruinessen,

“Most of the Muslim NGOs that flourished since the 1990s have shown themselves very open-minded towards non-Muslims and eager to engage in inter-religious dialogue and joint activities. Most Muslim NGO activists feel more at ease with their counterparts of Christian background than with fellow Muslims active in Islamist associations. The relaxed relations with non-Muslims distinguish the NGOs sharply from the Islamist groups, whether conservative or reform-minded”.<sup>13</sup>

## Interreligious initiatives in environmental conservation

There are also quite some interreligious initiatives that focus on environmental challenges in Indonesia. During the 2007 United Nations Climate Change Conference in Bali, the leaders of the six state-recognised religions (Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Protestantism and Catholicism) showed the commitment of their faith communities towards environmental challenges.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Z. Fuad, *Religious Pluralism in Indonesia*, p. 92-93.

<sup>13</sup> M. van Bruinessen, *Post-Suharto Muslims Engagements with Civil Society and Democratisation*, in: H. Samuel, H. Schulte Nordholt (eds.), *Indonesia in Transition. Rethinking 'Civil Society', 'Region', and 'Crisis'*, Yogyakarta 2004, p. 48.

<sup>14</sup> F. Mangunjaya et al., *Faiths from the Archipelago. Action on the Environment and Climate Change*, “Worldviews” 19 (2015) p. 103-122.

They also urged that environmental degradation becomes a common issue that needs collaborative action.<sup>15</sup>

The results of the Bali conference, the Bali Road Map and the Bali Action Plan were important inputs for the Kyoto Protocol, adapted in 2012. And they play an important role in summits on climate change until now.

Another example is the interreligious dialogue initiative in 2009 in Yogyakarta, called Climate Change and the Religions in Indonesia. During this meeting, the rector of the State Islamic University in Yogyakarta said that Christianity and Islam share similar arguments for a strong ethical commitment to environmental policy. This view was explicitly supported by the Catholic Archbishop of Semarang. Based on this common understanding, Muslims and Christians started interfaith alliances on various climate issues.<sup>16</sup>

Various international organisations have branches in Indonesia that are quite active. An example is the Religions for Peace Asia and the Pacific Interfaith Youth Network that issued a joint statement on “Our Earth, our responsibility” at the Religions for Peace Asia Interfaith Youth Peace Camp in Jakarta in 2017.<sup>17</sup>

Again another example is the Interfaith Coalition for Climate Action. This is an outcome of the Interfaith Climate Change Statement at the occasion of the signing of the Paris Agreement. In this statement, 270 high-level faith leaders support the Paris Agreement. Members of the Interfaith Coalition for Climate Action met in Jakarta in February 2019, among others to draft interfaith guides to tackle climate change.<sup>18</sup>

These guides take the form of a three-part book series focused on religious leaders and their congregations. The first book is made up of a collection

<sup>15</sup> *Joint Statement of Indonesian Religious and Traditional Leaders Concerning the Climate Change Issue*, in: [https://www.academia.edu/2320670/Religion\\_and\\_Conservation\\_Opportunities\\_for\\_Working\\_Together\\_to\\_Avoid\\_Deforestation\\_and\\_Address\\_Climate\\_Change](https://www.academia.edu/2320670/Religion_and_Conservation_Opportunities_for_Working_Together_to_Avoid_Deforestation_and_Address_Climate_Change) (2020-11-18).

<sup>16</sup> M. Reder, *Religion in the Public Sphere: The Social Function of Religion in the Context of Climate and Development Policy*, in: D. Gerten, S. Bergmann (eds.), *Religion in Environmental and Climate Change: Suffering, Values, Lifestyles*, London 2013, p. 40.

<sup>17</sup> <https://rfpasia.org/the-changing-climate-of-religious-youth-leaders-in-asia-a-reflection-on-the-2017-acrp-youth-peace-camp/> (2020-11-18).

<sup>18</sup> D. Vigran, *An Interfaith Coalition for Climate Action*, “The Solutions Journal” 11 (2020) no. 1, in: <https://www.thesolutionsjournal.com/article/interfaith-coalition-climate-action/>.

of essays on climate change and the relationship between humans and nature, written from the perspectives of the various religious groups. Next, there is a collection of religious texts on topics such as water, air, land and waste, to be used for preaching in their respective congregations. Lastly, each group contributes an article on the challenges and opportunities of running eco-friendly houses of worship.<sup>19</sup>

The Indonesian Consortium for Religious Studies, an initiative of a Protestant, an Islamic and a Public University, regularly holds workshops and seminars on ecological issues. For example, on September 3, 2020 there was a seminar on how offering in various religious traditions help to balance the relationship between humans and nature.<sup>20</sup>

In the same vein, the Netherlands-Indonesia Consortium for Muslim Christian Relations, an inter-faith network of Muslim and Christian universities and nongovernmental organisations, has a workgroup on the 'ecology and religion'. It has organized regular workshops and published a book.<sup>21</sup> It also stimulates collaboration between 'eco-friendly houses of worship', or 'green mosques' and 'green churches', both in the Netherlands and in Indonesia.

At grass-roots level there is the eco-pesantren Ath-Thaariq in Garut that regularly receives guests from Catholic schools.<sup>22</sup> Another example is the Eco

<sup>19</sup> N. Roshita, S. Daroyni, H.T. Asvita, D.L. Almitra (eds.), *Punduan Umum Eco-Rumah Ibadah 6 (Enam) Agama untuk Pengendalian Perubahan Iklim*, Jakarta 2020; N. Roshita, S. Daroyni, H.T. Asvita, D.L. Almitra (eds.), *Manusia dan Perubahan Iklim dalam Perspektif 6 Agama di Indonesia*, Jakarta 2020; N. Roshita (ed.), *Buku Saku Khotbah Untuk Umat Kristen Protestan*, Jakarta 2020; N. Roshita (ed.), *Buku Saku Dhammadesana Untuk Umat Buddha*, Jakarta 2020; N. Roshita (ed.), *Buku Saku Khotbah Untuk Umat Islam*, Jakarta 2020; N. Roshita (ed.), *Buku Saku Dharmawacana (Siraman Rohani) Untuk Umat Hindu*, Jakarta 2020; N. Roshita (ed.), *Buku Saku Khotbah Untuk Umat Katolik*, Jakarta 2020; N. Roshita (ed.), *Buku saku Jiang Dao Umat Umat Khonghucu*, Jakarta 2020.

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.icrs.or.id/news/offerings-and-harmonization-of-relations-between-humans-and-nature> (2020-11-18).

<sup>21</sup> Z. Bagir, M. Northcott, F. Wijsen (eds.), *Varieties of religion and ecology. Dispatches from Indonesia*, Münster LIT Verlag 2021. See further <https://nicmcr.org/pokjas-ecology-religion/> (2020-11-18).

<sup>22</sup> Fahrurrrazi, *To be Ecological is to become Pluralist. Inclusive Religious Education at the Eco-Pesantren Ath-Thaariq, West Java*, "Studies in Interreligious Dialogue" 29 (2019) no. 1.

Learning Camp in Bandung, run by a Catholic foundation, which is frequently visited by Muslims and members of other faith communities.<sup>23</sup>

## Lessons to be learned

A first lesson is that mainline Christians and Muslims consider environmental conservation as a new a new part of their missionary practice, moving from a social to a cosmic responsibility. However, it is not mission in an apologetic or propagating way. Participants in this environmental movement are faithful to their own religious traditions, but they realize that the ecological challenges are broader and more demanding than the call to convert and win others for their own faith.<sup>24</sup> A Qur'anic ethical principle is that there is no compulsion in religion. This principle applies to Muslims and non-Muslims. They have the right to convert to another religion or to have no religion at all. Undoubtedly, this is a controversial and contested principle in Indonesia. It nevertheless gives orientation to mainstream Muslim organisations such as Nadhlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah.<sup>25</sup>

Second, there are attempts at an inter-religious or comparative eco-theology. It is noteworthy that Pope Francis in his Encyclical *Laudato Si'* quotes the ninth century Muslim mystic Amin al Khawas.<sup>26</sup> This is the first time in the history that a Pope quotes a text from another spiritual tradition. There are attempts to better understand the Muslim notion of *khalifa* (usually translated

<sup>23</sup> K. Lestari, *Indonesian priest takes interfaith road on environmental awareness. Bandung's eco-Learning Camp transcends the religious divide to convey the urgency to save the planet*, "UCAnews" (2020-09-26), in: <https://www.ucanews.com/news/indonesian-priest-takes-interfaith-road-on-environmental-awareness/89660> (2020-11-18).

<sup>24</sup> In 1984, the Secretariat for Non-Christians (renamed Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue in 1988) distinguished for kinds of dialogue: dialogue of life, dialogue of action, dialogue of theological exchange, and dialogue of religious experience. One can consider the inter-faith movement for environmental conservation as a dialogue of action. See Secretariat for Non-Christians, *The Attitude of the Church towards the Followers of other Religions. Reflections and Orientations on Dialogue and Mission*, "Bulletin" 19 (1984) no. 2, see nos. 29-35 of the document.

<sup>25</sup> M. van Bruinessen, *Post-Subarto Muslims*, p. 48.

<sup>26</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, footnote 159.

in English as vicegerent or steward) and the Christian understanding of *Imago Dei* in relation to each other. Both notions conceptualise the equality of humans and nature as creatures of God, at the same time acknowledging the special mission of humans with respect to nature.

Third, in harmony with the latter point, Pope Francis in his Encyclical *Laudato Si'* stressed the collaboration with science and technology. Although Pope John Paul II started his Encyclical Letter *Fides et Ratio*, promulgated on 14 September 1998, by saying that “faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth”,<sup>27</sup> many scholars in the West find it difficult to see that revelation and rationality are compatible. Taking inspiration from mediaeval Islamic thinkers such as Ibn Sina, Al-Ghazali and Ibn Rushd, eco-modernists in Indonesian Islam balance revelation and rationality.<sup>28</sup> Moderation and balancing extremes is another principle in Indonesian Islam anyway.<sup>29</sup>

Fourth, in harmony with the previous point, there is mutual learning in terms of vocabulary. For Christians, terms such as *jihad*, *sharia*, *fatwa*, and *d'awa* may be frightening, because often associated with intolerance and sometimes even violence, but in the context of the environmentalism debate they can better understand the real meaning of these words. *Jihad* means strive, *eco-jihad* the strive for nature-friendly behaviour. *D'awa* means call; *eco-d'awa* the call to save the planet, and so on. For Muslims, the term *khalifa* may sound as an equivalent for ruler. However, from the perspective of *Laudato Si'*, going back to the mysticism of Francis of Assisi and Amin al Khawas, the steward is a partner of nature.

Last but not least, there is the notion that interreligious initiatives for environmental conservation are not only good for nature, but also for the religions themselves. In an era where some believers tend to go to the extremes, creating boundaries between faith communities, the ecological challenges

<sup>27</sup> Pope John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Fides et Ratio*, on the relationship between faith and reason.

<sup>28</sup> A. Gade, *Muslim Environmentalisms. Religious and Social Foundations*, New York 2019, pages 159, 187, 23; Z. Bagir, *Islam, Science and 'Islamic Science'*, in: Z. Bagir (ed.), *Science and Religion in a Post-Colonial World*. Adelaide 2005; S.H. Nasr, *The Islamic World-View and Modern Science*, “Islamic Quarterly” 39 (1995) no. 2, p. 73-89.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. *The Bogor Message*. Commitment of 100 World Muslim Scholars on the Paradigm of Wasatiyyat Islam (2018-05-03), Jakarta 2018.

show a common ground and stimulate practices that cross boundaries. Thus, environmental initiatives in Indonesia could benefit from interreligious initiatives, but also the other way around.

## Conclusion

Muslim-Christian dialogue has had a long history in Indonesia, but the environmentalism debate deepens it by placing it into a broader context. This debate gives a new insight into mission as the boundary-crossing practice of the Church,<sup>30</sup> crossing boundaries between people, religions, humans and nature, and ultimately crossing boundaries within the self.<sup>31</sup> The leader of Peace Generation Indonesia, a nongovernmental youth organisation that promotes peace through education, once said to me: peace with oneself, peace with others, and peace with nature go together.<sup>32</sup> As Pope Francis puts it,<sup>33</sup>

“... no one can cultivate a sober and satisfying life without being at peace with him or herself. An adequate understanding of spirituality consists in filling out what we mean by peace, which is much more than the absence of war. Inner peace is closely related to care for ecology and for the common good because, lived out authentically, it is reflected in a balanced lifestyle together with a capacity for wonder which takes us to a deeper understanding of life”.

<sup>30</sup> R. Schreier, *The Role of Intercultural Hermeneutics*, p. 24.

<sup>31</sup> H. Hermans, *Society in the Self. A theory of Identity in Democracy*, New York 2018, p. 231-233.

<sup>32</sup> Interview with Irfan Amelee (2018-03-26), Bandung.

<sup>33</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, no. 225.

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# Educating for the Covenant between Humanity and the Environment

The holistic perspective of *Laudato si'*  
and its consequences for the mission of the Church

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Five years after the promulgation of the encyclical *Laudato si'*, its core message – the care for our common home with its many aspects – is as important as ever. Although it is addressed to “all men and women of good will”, its perspective on creation and human responsibility contains important impulses for a deeper understanding of the mission of the Church in general and the mission of each individual Church member in particular. This is especially due to the holistic perspective of *Laudato si'* with its stress on the interconnectedness of all things and beings, thus broadening a traditionally more anthropocentric perspective of humanity’s role in salvation history.

Choosing this holistic perspective as point of departure of the following considerations, I want to point out some of its systematic theological roots, especially the intrinsic relational ontology or world view and theology of creation. On this basis, the mission of the church as universal sacrament of salvation according to *Lumen gentium* 1 can be widened to be “a sign and instrument” not only of “both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race” but also of a unity of humanity with creation. I will

conclude by explaining what this means for the concrete missionary practice of the church, using the field of education as an example.<sup>1</sup>

## Philosophical and systematic-theological foundations<sup>2</sup>

The holistic perspective of *Laudato si'* and the relational ontology it implies are evident in the very first numbers when Pope Francis quotes Saint Francis reminding us that we share our life with our common home as a sister and that our bodies are made up of its elements. Less poetically expressed is the aim of an “integral ecology” including the affective response to the world around us (LS 11) and the “concern to bring the whole human family together to seek a sustainable and integral development” (LS 13). This phrase implies more systematic theological presuppositions than it seems since as well the reference to the “whole human family” as mentioning an integral development refer to the unity of mankind and the manifoldness of aspects relevant to an integral understanding of development. The same is valid for Pope Francis’ reference to the interconnectedness of all creatures (e.g. LS 42, 70, 91, 137), an indigenous wisdom discussed in more detail by Stefan Silber in this volume.<sup>3</sup> But the interconnectedness is not restricted to living creatures but encompasses time and space as well as atoms or subatomic

<sup>1</sup> Cf. also the Global Compact on Education, “a pact to encourage change on a global scale, so that education may become a creator of fraternity, peace, and justice. An even more urgent need in this time scarred by the pandemic.” <https://www.educationglobalcompact.org/en/> (2020.11.13).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. C. Arboleda Mora / J.P. Gutiérrez R., *Desarrollo integral y responsabilidad con la casa común. Perspectivas de análisis filosófico-teológico de la encíclica Laudato si'*, “RIBET” 13 (2017) no. 24, p. 65-92; G.A. Bagu, *A Sound Ecology based on adequate Anthropology and Cosmology: An Evaluation of Laudato Si'*, “APT” 6 (2016), p. 71-90; M. Beuchot Puente, *La filosofía en la Encíclica Laudato si'*, “Piezas” 6 (2015) no. 21, p. 18-26; I. R. Edara, *Understanding Laudato Si's View of Ecological Education and Well-Being from an Indigenous Relational Perspective*, “Philippiniana Sacra” 52 (2017) no. 157, p. 815-840; A. P. Ekpe, *Earth as our Common Home: A philosophical reflection as an appreciation of Laudato Si'*, “APT” 6 (2016) p. 3-25; V. Mendonca, *A Metaphysics of Intersubjectivity for an integral Ecology. The Relevance of Teilhard and Whitehead for the vision of Laudato Si'*, “Horizons” 9 (2015), no. 4, p. 748-762; A. Valungal, *Laudato Si': A Spirituality of Relationships and its Challenges in Ecology*, “The Living Word” 122 (2016) no. 2, p. 123-132.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. also I.R. Edara, *Op. cit.*, p. 822f with his explications of a “kincentric ecology”.

particles (LS 138). With the reference to the interrelated physical, chemical and biological aspects of the planet, Francis draws on scientific insights showing that it is impossible to separate these perspectives. “Nevertheless, though Francis stresses several times that the Divine, the human and the world of nature should not be separated, he has not sufficiently explained how they should be or are related or interconnected.”<sup>4</sup> He thus implicitly advocates a relational ontology and connects it closely with his understanding of creation theology. This corresponds with a trinitarian perspective, since the world is a web of relationships because it is “created according to the divine model” (LS 240), meaning that a key to the fulfilment of the human person is to enter into relationships and to follow the trinitarian dynamism, “going out from themselves to live in communion with God, with others and with all creatures” (LS 240). Further expressions of this relational ontology are the intergenerational perspective of *Laudato si’* (LS 53), the stress on the “various cultural riches of different peoples” and the necessity of a dialogue with it (LS 63), and especially the highlighted relationships of human life “with God, with our neighbour and with the earth itself” (LS 66). This is combined with stressing the intrinsic value of all creatures due to their being created by God and sharing the fullness of God as ultimate destiny (LS 83); thus all created things can be regarded as a “universal family” (LS 89). Referring to the stories of Cain and Abel and Noah, Francis points out “that everything is interconnected, and that genuine care for our own lives and our relationships with nature is inseparable from fraternity, justice and faithfulness to others” (LS 70, cf. 91). Thus, by combining the relational-ontological basis with a socio-ethical perspective that is not anthropocentric but sees humanity as a part of creation (while adhering to the unique worth of human beings because of the personalist principle [LS 90]), he implicitly stresses that creation theology and anthropology cannot be understood correctly without social justice. Being a part of creation implies being responsible for the well-being of nature and being aware of the specific purpose of each creature. He shares this conviction with e.g. Elizabeth Johnson, who pleads for a theocentric creation theology with the “broader vision of a community of all living creatures centered on God”<sup>5</sup> with just relations

<sup>4</sup> V. Mendonca, Op. cit., p. 750.

<sup>5</sup> E. Johnson, *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love*, London/New York 2015, p. 262. I restrict myself to mentioning only some similarities between Johnson and Pope Francis without disregarding the differences which exist, e.g. concerning the role of humanity.

between all creatures. The consequence of this broader vision is the call for an intellectual, emotional and ethical conversion to the earth. Furthermore, Johnson criticizes explicitly the paradigm of dominion and points out the roots of the ecological crisis in a specific anthropology, which is another common point to Pope Francis. “He argues that the approach of dualism between the Divine and the human on the one hand and human and the nature on the other has led to this ecological crisis.”<sup>6</sup> Francis combines this critique of a dualism with a critique of a technocratic paradigm that goes hand in hand with a positivistic and scientific attitude and adopts rather an analogical position like that of Romano Guardini, whom he quotes in this encyclical. Thus, the Pope draws on two main currents of contemporary philosophy from the continental tradition: phenomenology and hermeneutics. In contrast to the more scientific perspective of analytical philosophy of the Anglo-Saxon tradition, these are more humanist and centred on the human person, and therefore more adequate for an integral anthropology and ecology.<sup>7</sup> “Our relationship with the environment can never be isolated from our relationship with others and with God.” (LS 119) Ecology, anthropology and social ethics are closely linked. “Thus the heart of Pope Francis’ encyclical is an integral ecology as a new paradigm of justice; an ecology which respects our unique place as human beings in this world and our relationship to our surroundings, and which acknowledges that nature cannot be regarded as something separate from ourselves or as a mere setting in which we live.”<sup>8</sup> To achieve a healthy relationship with the environment, several virtues should be cultivated: humility for overcoming an assumption of superiority, fidelity and friendship going beyond a utilitarian position, and communion with nature that “incorporates existing virtues of awe, humility and friendship, but also involves a commitment to all natural entities as they are in themselves”<sup>9</sup>.

A consequence of this universal approach focussing on the relationships between all created beings is the critique of a technocratic paradigm and the plea for a “healthier, more human, more social, more integral” type of progress (LS 112), since that includes social aspects as well as economic and environmental ones. E.g., an integral ecology also encompasses the understanding

<sup>6</sup> V. Mendonca, *Op. cit.*, p. 750, cf. Bagu, *Op. cit.*

<sup>7</sup> Cf. M. Beuchot Puente, *Op. cit.*, p. 21 and A. Ekpe, *Op. cit.*

<sup>8</sup> I.R. Edara, *Op. cit.*, p. 825.

<sup>9</sup> Bagu, *Op.cit.*, p. 90.

of (human) work (LS 126ff). Furthermore, an integral approach to development means a stress on eliminating extreme poverty and promoting social development in poor countries, while in rich countries the focus will rather lie in propagating a humbler lifestyle and accept decreased growth. This is combined with an attitude of self-transcendence in the sense of overcoming self-centredness and self-absorption that recognizes other creatures for their true worth (LS 208).

The relativity pointed out by a relational ontology does not necessarily imply a relativism but can (not must) be combined with the assumption of objective truths or a universal moral law (LS 122f, 155) – but these themselves cannot simply be identified with truths or moral presuppositions that arise out of only one specific culture, thus perhaps disregarding the relations to others. In fact, Francis defends the values and rights of peoples and cultures, since culture “is also, and above all, a living, dynamic and participatory present reality, which cannot be excluded as we rethink the relationship between human beings and the environment.” (LS 143) He thus combines the perspectives of a moral objectivism based on objective truths with the plurality of world views by confirming both the existence of objective truths and the plurality of reality with its effects on plurally conceiving such truths.

Thus, by pointing out the interconnectedness of all things and creatures as being created by the triune God and the importance of the threefold relationship of the human person with God, other people and the environment, Pope Francis argues on the basis of a relational ontology. This itself is a consequence of understanding creation as an image of the triune God with the divine Persons being in relation with each other. The main characteristic of such a relational ontology is the assumption that subjects and objects are distinguished from other subjects and objects not by their substance but by mutual relations. Thus, the relations are regarded as ontologically more fundamental than the subjects or objects themselves. All entities are directly or indirectly interconnected and influence each other thus preventing a monadic conception of essence. Since the nature of a thing depends on its relations with other things, it has to be conceived as being much more fluid than in a classic idealistic position like e.g. Platonism.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> A prominent proponent of relational ontology in Germany is Peter Knauer. Cf. D. Kraschl, *Relationale Ontologie. Ein Diskussionsbeitrag zu offenen Problemen der Philosophie*, Würzburg 2012.

A good and prominent example is the principle of relationality being the basic axiom in Andean philosophy. According to it, all is connected to all and there are no absolute, unconnected and unrelational realities. Because the relations and not individual entities are central, there are no dominances or separated polarities but graded transitions and thus diverse phenomena of transition. “Without relation and mediation there is no life according to andine understanding.”<sup>11</sup> The most important consequences of this principle of relationality are the principles of complementarity and correspondence, meaning that all being and all events are incomplete without the relation to an opposite and that microcosmos and macrocosmos correspond to each other.

Especially with regard to the roots of Christian theology in a trinitarian understanding of God and its stress on the relations – the perichoresis – of the three divine persons, a relational ontology seems very appropriate for a Christian theology. This is valid also for the Church which can be understood as an image of the trinity.<sup>12</sup>

### The mission of the Church: Sacrament of Salvation<sup>13</sup>

A relational perspective is not only the basis of Pope Francis’ argumentation in *Laudato si’*, but also very helpful for understanding the church as a “universal sacrament of salvation”, that is a “sign and instrument of both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race” (LG 1). For to speak of a sign, it is necessary to ask what constitutes the sign as a sign, which leads to the question of the connection or relation between (at least) the sign and the signified.

The sign, by its very nature, should be something visible and verifiable; the sign should, also by its nature, refer

<sup>11</sup> J. Estermann, *Apu Taytayku. Religion und Theologie im andinen Kontext Lateinamerikas*, Ostfildern 2012, p. 68, transl. TFP.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. M. Wolf, *After our likeness. The Church as image of the trinity*, Grand Rapids 1998.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. in more detail T. Fornet-Ponse, *Respectivity and a Theology of Signs*, in: M. Ashley, K. Burke and R. Cardenal (ed.), *A Grammar of Justice. The Legacy of Ignacio Ellacuría*, Maryknoll 2014, p. 103-117.

to something that is both in relation to the sign, but which is not the sign itself. The sign does not have to resemble what it signifies; e.g. the linguistic sign does not resemble the message it wants to transmit but its effectiveness lies in transmitting the message. The sign is nothing but an active mediation between two extremes, whose connection cannot be immediate.<sup>14</sup>

With regard to the character of the church as a sacrament, the union between God and humankind takes place in a historical process, the history of salvation. Assuming the existence of a sign of this union as active mediation presupposes the notion of a complex and differentiated unity of reality implying a foundational interconnectedness with every real thing being related to every other real thing in the cosmos. This relational perspective on the meaning of sign supports Francis' point of the interconnectedness whereby the understanding of the church as a sacrament can be widened to be a sign and instrument of the communion with God, the unity of humanity and the communion with all creatures. Since all kinds of relations are references of a real thing to another, this presupposes an intrinsic and formal openness of a real thing. "Only because reality is respectively open, it is possible to have relation."<sup>15</sup> In particular the openness of a real thing and this determination of the relationship of a real thing to the whole of reality can be successfully applied for the question of grounding a theology of sign and understanding the Church as a sign of God's reign. The perfect sign who shows a possible historicization of the mediation between God and humankind is Jesus. "In continuing the work of Jesus Christ, therefore, we must seek out the specific kind of mediation that will signify God and make him present in a sign way."<sup>16</sup> Insofar as the church continues its life and mission, it is a historical sacrament of liberation and thus a fundamental sign of God. The church only does justice to its character as a mediating sign if it

<sup>14</sup> I. Ellacuría, *Iglesia y realidad histórica*, in: *Ibid.*, *Escritos teológicos II*, San Salvador 2000, p. 501-515, 505, partially translated by R. Lassalle-Klein, *Rethinking Rahner on Grace and Symbol. New Proposals from the Americas*, in: Paul Crowley (ed.), *Rahner beyond Rahner: A Great Theologian Encounters the Pacific Rim*, Lanham 2005, p. 87-99, 95.

<sup>15</sup> X. Zubiri, *Respectividad de lo real*, in: *Realitas III-IV* (1979) p. 13-43, 40.

<sup>16</sup> I. Ellacuría, *Freedom made Flesh. The Mission of Christ and His Church*, Maryknoll 1976, p. 87-88.

is at work in history, “when it strives wholeheartedly to be itself a sign, and only a sign, of the God who has revealed himself in history.”<sup>17</sup> To be credible, this should be fleshed out in historical praxis and salvation must be proclaimed in a signifying way.

And the nature of signs requires us to consider both what should be signified and to whom it is to be signified. What should be signified in this case is the total salvation of human beings in and through their intrinsic deification; and the addressee of this effort is the world of today, which is engaged in the salvation of the history that it bears on its shoulders. Thus salvation in history is the present-day sign of salvation history.<sup>18</sup>

As a historical reality, the church itself influences the configuration of salvation in history. Combining the essential historicity of salvation and the need of mediating salvation in history through the church, it is possible to explore how the sign is properly incarnated. Liberation, justice, and love are essential dimensions both of the historical world and of the gospel message and thus “offer an adequate channel for mediating salvation in a historical way, and for allowing the Church to present itself as the sign par excellence of the God who saves the world.”<sup>19</sup> The church exists to be the sign of the gospel’s credibility in history, to be a universal sacrament of liberation that addresses its concrete historical reality and especially the world of the poor. Also in view of the current crisis and challenges, the option for the poor is still necessary and includes the commitment to an integral ecology since e.g. the consequences of climate change for global injustice and arising poverty cannot be underestimated.

The people of God are characterized by a preferential option for the liberation of the poor because God is specially attentive to the oppressed and marginalized. With the holistic perspective taken by *Laudato si’*, this attentiveness is not restricted to oppressed and marginalized men and women but also to suffering elements of the whole of creation. By following Jesus

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 89.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 93, trans. emended.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 95.

and serving God's reign, the church realizes its vocation to make present the Reign of God in history. As historical sacrament of liberation, the church must become the historical body of Christ by following his life, by being a church of the poor and serving as a historical sacrament of liberation.<sup>20</sup> The church needs to dedicate itself to liberation from injustice in this world because of its sign character as well as because it is an essential aspect of its mission and its service to the world. "If the church is to be credible to the world to which it has been sent, it needs only be in fact what it is supposed to be in nature... At each and every moment in history it must look for the sign-bearing role that will serve it adequately in fleshing out its true being in history and that will enable the world to recognize its true character."<sup>21</sup> This leads nowadays not only to the option for the poor, but also to the option for the environment as an expression of the commitment of the church.

A consequence of this credibility is to recognize the contribution of the Church to the unjust oppression of human beings and to undergo a painful conversion and do penance. Furthermore, it also has to take positive action in the struggle against injustice. "Its specific contribution lies in fighting injustice insofar as injustice is sin."<sup>22</sup> Since the ecological crisis is both a result of injustice and leads to further injustice, struggling positively against injustice includes fighting for an integral ecology and saving the planet. This struggle is not only a consequence of being a sacrament of salvation in history, but is also founded in Christian love. For in the central mystery of the incarnation, the two basic dimensions of love, God's love for humankind and humankind's love for God, meet and interact. "The love which Christianity proclaims, the love whereby Christians will be recognized as such and will make known the divinity of Jesus, must conform itself to the love which Jesus proclaimed and lived in his own life."<sup>23</sup> On the line of *Laudato si'* this should be extended

<sup>20</sup> See I. Ellacuría, *Pobres*, in: *Ibid.*, *Escritos teológicos II*, San Salvador 2000, p. 171-192, 188-192; I. Ellacuría, *Iglesia como pueblo de Dios*, in: *Ibid.*, *Escritos teológicos II*, San Salvador 2000, p. 317-342, 327-331; I. Ellacuría, *La Iglesia de los pobres, sacramento histórico de liberación*, in: *Ibid.*, *Escritos teológicos II*, San Salvador 2000, p. 453-485, 475-485, trans. by M. Wilde as *The Church of the Poor: Historical Sacrament of Liberation*, in: M. Lee, (ed.), *Ignacio Ellacuría: Essays in History, Liberation, and Salvation*, Maryknoll 2013, p. 227-253.

<sup>21</sup> Ellacuría, *Freedom*, p. 110; see also 160ff.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 119.

to the love of God, each other and all of creation. This goes hand in hand with a radical power of transformation without which it would not be able to serve as a sign of salvation. The objectification of love in history has to be centred on the union of divine love and human love including the relation to the whole of creation, and it has to struggle to eliminate sin. “Christian hope impels the Church to engage in the active construction of the world, in a process that will really signify and lead towards the kingdom of God.”<sup>24</sup>

Because the Church as a whole must be a sign of Jesus the Saviour, it is obliged to do what it really and truly signifies. It must not rest content with being a mere sign but move towards being more than just a sign. “The Church will be able to carry out its mission of signifying and fleshing out the salvation of Jesus Christ only insofar as the Church is preserved from the world and carries on the gospel message – in short, only insofar as it is the holy Church.”<sup>25</sup>

## Integral education and the mission of the Church

An important part of the mission of the church that is especially suited for fulfilling her mission to be an instrumental sign of God’s Reign in this broad perspective of serving the communion with God, with others and with all creatures (cf. LS 240), is the field of education. In fact, Pope Francis regards a process of education as necessary for the change he proposes with *Laudato si’*. This includes special issues like the awareness of water saving behaviour (LS 30) or attempts to correct the technocratic paradigm (LS 111), but first and foremost the main perspective of an ecological education and spirituality and its aim for “an awareness of our common origin, of our mutual belonging, and of a future to be shared with everyone” (LS 202). More specifically, one important aim of education is to establish new habits that give justice to the covenant between humanity and the environment. Thus, Francis focusses on an understanding of environmental education that includes not only information but also the critique of the modern mindset by pointing out the need for “the various levels of ecological equilibrium, establishing harmony within ourselves, with

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 123.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 125.

others, with nature and other living creatures, and with God” (LS 210).<sup>26</sup> Thus, on the basis of a relational ontology and creation theology, an environmental education must not be limited to the mundane level but has to keep in mind the transcendent dimension, too. Furthermore, it should not be limited to providing information but should aim to transform behaviour by building habits and attitudes needed for a lifestyle that protects the environment. One of the institutions that are entrusted with the task of raising awareness is the Church. “All Christian communities have an important role to play in ecological education. It is my hope that our seminaries and houses for formation will provide an education in responsible simplicity of life, in grateful contemplation of God’s world, and in concern for the needs of the poor and the protection of the environment.” (LS 214)

To express this perspective in a curriculum, it seems appropriate to integrate single topics mentioned by Pope Francis like water saving behaviour into the broader frame of an integral education, introducing them into the holistic perspective on (human) life and creation. This would combine the transcendent dimension as well as the immanent, the perspective of different religions, world views and philosophies as well as the scientific expertise on special subjects like climate change etc. This diversity of perspectives is accompanied by a critique of reductionist positions, be it the technocratic or scientist paradigm as epistemological hegemonism or other forms like an idealistic or materialistic position. An integral perspective on education furthermore leads to distinguishing several core domains of learning, e.g. the cognitive, socio-emotional and behavioural domain used by the concept of Global Citizenship Education (which is championed by the UNESCO).<sup>27</sup> Referring to this distinction, the educational measures of the church would focus not only on imparting knowledge about spirituality, the mutual belonging or the interconnectedness of all created beings in general and environmental issues in special, but would also

<sup>26</sup> Also LS 215: “Our efforts at education will be inadequate and ineffectual unless we strive to promote a new way of thinking about human beings, life, society and our relationship with nature.”

<sup>27</sup> Cf. UNESCO, *Global Citizenship Education. Topics and Learning Objectives*, 2015. They correspond closely to the effects of first, second and third order of activities in development education that were evaluated by a government funded research programme in Germany. Cf. C. Bergmüller, B. Causemann, S. Höck, J.-M. Krier and E. Quiring, *Wirkungsorientierung in der entwicklungspolitischen Inlandsarbeit*, Münster – New York 2019.

address the action guiding convictions and above all the opportunity to work for transformation towards a more just world or, theologically speaking, the Kingdom of God. This would include analyzing and reflecting on the interconnected nature of global issues and the interdependence of factors like history, geography, politics, economics and culture, comparing and contrasting shared and different social, cultural, religious and legal traditions and norms or developing skills for effective civic engagement or challenging discrimination and inequalities.<sup>28</sup> Concrete examples for a European context could be (practical) courses about other or dialogical spiritualities, e.g. a Christian Ashram like that founded by P. Sebastian Painadath, measures in interreligious dialogue (especially Christian-Muslim dialogue) and a global view of religious freedom, or activities about sustainable development and unjust economic relations and structures with a focus on actions suited to challenging such structures.

The overall objective of these diverse measures within a holistic perspective is to enable the individual person to “develop his or her own deep-rooted attitudes and vocation, and thus contribute to his or her vocation within the community”<sup>29</sup>. But in contrast to the quite recently published guidelines “Educating to fraternal humanism” by the Congregation for Catholic Education, which scarcely mention the environmental aspect explicitly and have a tendency towards an anthropocentric view,<sup>30</sup> the focus is on the interconnectedness of all created beings and its consequences for the responsibilities of human behaviour. Thus, the holistic perspective of *Laudato si’* allows for a critique of rather anthropocentric sounding educational programmes and offers the possibility of widening their perspective. To prevent an anthropocentric understanding of this educational objective, I would propose the term “creationism of solidarity” instead of “fraternal humanism” were the term “creationism” not as negatively connotated as it is. Being this the case, a “humanism of solidarity” might still be a valid option. Another option might be – with the disadvantage of proposing a “centrism” – a “ecocentrism of solidarity”, “which, going

<sup>28</sup> Cf. UNESCO, Op. cit., p. 31-40.

<sup>29</sup> Congregation for Catholic Education, *Educating to fraternal humanism. Building a “civilization of love” 50 years after Populorum progressio. Guidelines*; April 2017; No. 8. [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc\\_con\\_ccatheduc\\_doc\\_20170416\\_educare-umanesimo-solidale\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_20170416_educare-umanesimo-solidale_en.html) (13.11.2020)

<sup>30</sup> An exception is No 22 where the “skills needed to make key choices for the natural balance of human-social, natural, environmental systems, etc.” are mentioned.

beyond the axiological egalitarianism of biocentrism, recognizes the intrinsic value of both each individual entity as subject of experience and the system of which it is a part<sup>31</sup>.

By following this path and not separating the option for the poor from the option for the environment, the Church can fulfil her mission as a sign of God's reign. It would confront the key issues and most relevant of the contemporary crises and deal with them not separately but as parts or aspects of a complex crisis including social, environmental and further dimensions. Since an effective change towards a just world, which includes intergenerational justice as well as justice for all creatures and created things and thus corresponds to the relation ontological and creation theological assumptions outlined above, can only be achieved through appropriate individual and institutional action, education plays a central role in this change. Educating many individual people, and especially those who will be responsible for far-reaching political or institutional decisions towards a sustainable lifestyle according to the option for the poor and raising their awareness for their interconnectedness with each other and all of creation and pointing possible philosophical and religious foundations for these views, is then an important contribution the church can make towards this effective change. With this contribution, it would act as an effective sign of God's reign or as a universal sacrament of salvation understood as harmony between all created things.

## Conclusion

Concluding and summarizing my considerations, I want to point out the following aspects: Pope Francis' arguments for a holistic approach and the interconnectedness of all things, thus leading to an understanding of the social and the environmental crises as parts of one complex crisis and his assumption that the communion with each other cannot be separated from the communion with God and with all created things, are not a result of responding to the *Zeitgeist*. Instead, they have a sound philosophical basis in relation ontology

<sup>31</sup> V. Mendonca, Op. cit., p. 759 with reference to B. Henning, *Stewardship and the Roots of the Ecological Crisis*, in: J. Cobb and I. Castuera (eds.), *For Our Common Home: Process-Relational Responses to Laudato Si'*, Anoka 2015, p. 41-51, p. 45.

and are stringent consequences of understanding creation as the work of the triune God who made it in his/her own image. This holistic perspective leads to reconsidering the understanding of the church as universal sacrament of salvation that cannot be conceived as being limited to humanity and has to regard humanity's position in the cosmos and the interconnectedness of the relation of humans to each other, to the creation and to God. To be an effective sign of God's Reign, the Church has to engage in several activities promoting such an integral and sustainable development, education being an important one of them. As a consequence, this means that although environmental education at first glance does not seem to be a central theme of the church's educational activities, it is indeed of utmost importance. For without this aspect, no comprehensive education which takes into account the diversity of reality and its fundamental and differentiated unity is possible – and the Church could not be an effective a sign of God's Reign and could not fulfil its mission.

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# Ecological Conversion and Missions

## Expression “Ecological Conversion” in Polish Internet

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Nobody would be surprised if the topic of my presentation was “Conversion and missions”, however, the topic of “Ecological Conversion and Missions” may initially be surprising. While “ecology” is most often associated with the call to recycle, turn off unnecessary lights, save water, use public transport or opt for the Paris climate agreement, it seems that Pope Francis’ intention goes much further. His calling for ecological conversion, focused on the so-called “Integral ecology”, is aimed at the good of all mankind.

Already in the teaching of Jesus Christ, the call to conversion was associated with a certain process of change of heart and mind, which was to lead to authentic changes in the way of life and behavior.

Bernard Lonergan, in his famous book “Method in Theology”, speaks about three levels of conversion. First he talks about intellectual conversion, then about moral conversion, and finally about religious conversion. Here I will only deal with this first level.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See his *Method in Theology* or some of the articles written on this issue, e.g. W. Conn, *Bernard Lonergan’s Analysis of Conversion*, “Angelicum” 53 (1976) no. 3, p. 362-404.

I begin my presentation on ecological conversion with a short history of observations of my former students. With some of them I remained in contact also after finishing their studies, either in the form of Facebook or periodic meetings with alumni.

Most of the students that come to study are still single people. It is interesting to observe changes of their attitudes or judgments. In the first period, the word “I” is very often dominant. **I** think, **I** plan, **I** guess.

Towards the end of their studies or shortly after, many of them met their future life partners. This period of life is very joyful because they often talk about it. During this period of fascination with a new relationship with a new boyfriend / girlfriend, the word “we” appears on many occasions. **We** want, **We** plan, **We** want to do something.

After some years many of them have started their new families. They already have children. It is interesting to observe their further development. In the early years, when many of them are young mothers, the topic of children is virtually inevitable. They can talk for hours about their kids. It is important what the child needs, what is planned for the child, how to ensure a happy future for the child. Dominant word is “**it**”.

This transition from the word “I” through “we” to “it” is very interesting. This is a good example of what intellectual conversion is all about. It is by no means unpleasant or burdensome. Changing attitudes takes place with great joy and brings a great change in the perspective of looking at the same reality.

## The concept of “Ecological Conversion” in Christian reflection

Each conversion is essentially a return to God. It is a kind of return from the ashes and dust to the brotherly community of God’s beloved children. Classical theological reflection, and thus also missiological, most often focuses on the issues of divine-human relations. Relationships with the surrounding nature are perceived rather incidentally. Some changes in such attitude began about half a century ago. One of the representatives of “Process Theology” John Cobb, in the mid-1960s, published his famous text “A Christian Natural Theology”, and in 1972 he published his book “Is It Too Late? A Theology of Ecology”. Also in 1972, Gordon Kaufman published his famous article, “A Problem for Theology: The Concept of Nature.” These authors dealt with the challenges posed by contemporary theology to a very anthropocentric

model of God, which depreciated the reflection on God's relation to all creation.

For more or less 30 years, this reflection began to be taken up also by greater Christian authorities, such as the official teaching of the Catholic Church or the World Council of Churches. John Paul II already entitled his Message for the World Day of Peace on January 1, 1990 "The Ecological Crisis: A Common Responsibility." He has already mentioned there need for an ecological conversion.

In 1988, the Catholic Bishops of the Philippines issued the letter "What Is Happening to Our Beautiful Land." Two years later, the US Bishops' Conference also published its position, "Renewing the Earth." Similarly, in October 2003, Canadian bishops published a letter on the environment.

Although in the official teaching of the Church's Magisterium the concept of "ecological conversion" was already used several times by John Paul II (see the catechesis of January 17, 2001; some references in the encyclicals "Centesimus Annus" nos. 37-38 and 58 and "Sollicitudo Rei Socialis" no. 34) as well as Benedict XVI (including in the encyclical "Caritas in Veritate"), but recently it has been mainly popularized by Pope Francis in the encyclical "Laudato si".

## Examples from history of missions (ecology, conversion & going towards self-sustainability)

Many missiological publications in recent years have raised ecological issues, showing the need to rethink the (intellectual) place of issues related to the environment and missionary activity. It turned out that what seems new today (and perhaps even shocking to many) has long been practiced in missions, although these terms were not used. Mission history provides abundant data showing the variety of missionary attitudes toward traditional nature-based practices. Here I just mention few of them<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> There are many publications on this issue. I just want to mention K.J. Kaoma (ed.), *Creation Care in Christian Mission*, Oxford 2015 – with many interesting articles.

When the famous Polish missionary from China, Michael Boym SJ (died 1659), sent to Europe as an envoy of the last Ming emperor, was explaining Chinese customs, he wrote about *Flora Sinensis* (Chinese flora).

Missions in various parts of the world were also open to the inculturation of native natural practices. With the conquest of the Americas, the monastic model of agrarian Christian society was modified in the form of “reductions” run by Franciscans and Jesuits.<sup>3</sup>

The well-known Orthodox missionary, hermit Saint Herman of Alaska (died 1837) was open to the religious customs of the Aleutians, taking them into account in his liturgical and sacramental practices. When he became head of the Russian mission in 1799, he tried to protect the Aleutians from the exploitation of Russian merchants. Among other things, he opposed the slaughter of sea animals by Western merchants.

Many missionaries lived in solidarity with ordinary people, sharing their poor lives in accordance with the rhythm of nature, but also took care of the development of the natural environment. When William Carey traveled to India in 1793, he took over 100 botanical journals with him. He is best known for his work on translating the Bible, but he also helped establish the famous Serampore Botanical Garden. In addition, he edited a guide to plants found there, and in 1820 he founded the Indian Agricultural and Horticultural Society to promote the development of agriculture.

Robert Moffatt of the *London Missionary Society* was often referred to as “God’s Gardener” because he was a gardener before he left for South Africa (in 1817). He took gardening tools and books on botany and agriculture with him. Moffatt used modern plant production methods as a means of attacking certain traditional customs. For example, by introducing irrigation into his gardens, he undermined the power of traditional chiefs.

I do not want to multiply these examples here. I think it would be worth taking up Dana Robert’s statement. She wrote:

***The history of agricultural missions is one of the great unwritten chapters of mission studies, and the least documented of the three main foci of missionary development***

<sup>3</sup> See D.L. Robert, *Historical Trends in Missions and Earth Care*, in: K.J. Kaoma (ed.), *Creation Care in Christian Mission*, Oxford 2015, p. 74-77. Bold added – WK.

*work – education, healthcare, and agriculture. At the height of European colonialism, the ‘agricultural missionary’ became a staple part of so-called ‘industrial’ missions. Often located in the context of colonial ‘land grant’ mission stations, the purpose of the agricultural missionary was to increase local capacity for food production, including the introduction of modern farming methods, drought-resistant seed varieties, and fruit trees such as mangoes, guavas and papayas.*

*Agricultural missionaries introduced crop rotation, contour ridges, and reforestation projects, even as their efforts enabled missions to be self-sustaining in food production. **They typically saw their work as integral to the missionary message of abundant life through conversion to Jesus Christ.** Along with healing by medical doctors, **their work to ensure food security was one of the most visible and obvious benefits of the missionary presence in colonial settings.** Agricultural missionaries naturally shared attitudes towards land common to their own eras, but their professional training and empirical observation often allowed for accommodation to local conditions. Despite their mistakes and captivity to contemporary scientific farming and management techniques, agricultural missionaries filled one of the first formal conservationist roles in the non-western world. They also communicated valuable ecological information from the margins of empire back to its heartland.<sup>4</sup>*

### Pope Francis’ *Laudato sí* and *Querida Amazonía*

By breaking the impasse in thinking about ecological problems in the Church, the encyclical showed the global context of these issues, formulating, inter alia, the concept of ecological conversion and integral ecology. The concept of “ecological sin” is also gradually entering the minds of Catholics. 5 years after the publication of the encyclical, some changes in the approach to environmental

<sup>4</sup> D.L. Robert, Op. cit., p. 77-78. Bold added – WK.

problems are already visible. The Year of “Laudato si”, announced by Pope Francis, takes up the challenge of “ecological conversion”. We have to ask yourself – As a Christian, do I give myself the right to waste resources – food, water, energy? And since social problems are responded to by communal bonds (and not only by the sum of individual goods), ecological conversion must be communal conversion. The entire part of the encyclical “Laudato si”,<sup>5</sup> including numbers 216-221, was entitled “Ecological conversion”. We read there, among others

216. [...] I would like to offer Christians **a few suggestions for an ecological spirituality grounded in the convictions of our faith** [...] Christians have not always appropriated and developed the spiritual treasures bestowed by God upon the Church, where the life of the spirit is not dissociated from the body or from nature or from worldly realities, but lived in and with them, in communion with all that surrounds us.

217. [...] what they all need is an **“ecological conversion”**, whereby the effects of their encounter with Jesus Christ become evident in their relationship with the world around them. Living our vocation to be protectors of God’s handiwork [...].

218. [...] we come to realize that a healthy **relationship with creation** is one dimension of **overall personal conversion**, which entails the recognition of our errors, sins, faults and failures, and leads to heartfelt repentance and desire to change. [...]

219. [...] The **ecological conversion** needed to bring about lasting change is also a **community conversion**.

220. This conversion calls for a number of attitudes which together foster a spirit of generous care, full of tenderness. First, it entails **gratitude and gratuitousness**, a recognition that the

<sup>5</sup> Francis (Pope), Encyclical Letter *Laudato si’* on the Care for our Common Home (May 24, 2015).

*world is God's loving gift, and that we are called quietly **to imitate his generosity in self-sacrifice and good works** [...].*

*221. Various convictions of our faith, developed at the beginning of this Encyclical can help us to enrich the meaning of this conversion. These include the **awareness that each creature reflects something of God and has a message to convey to us**, and the security that Christ has taken unto himself this material world and now, risen, is intimately present to each being, surrounding it with his affection and penetrating it with his light. [...] We read in the Gospel that Jesus says of the birds of the air that "not one of them is forgotten before God" (Lk 12:6).*

Pope Francis also referred to these issues in his last exhortation "Querida Amazonia"<sup>6</sup> in chapter three, in which he wrote about the "ecological dream", especially in number 41, where we read:

*In the Amazon region, one better understands the words of Benedict XVI when he said that, "alongside the ecology of nature, there exists what can be called a 'human' ecology which in turn demands a 'social' ecology. All this means that humanity... must be increasingly conscious of the links between natural ecology, or respect for nature, and human ecology". This insistence that "everything is connected" is particularly true of a territory like the Amazon region.*

On June 8, 2019, Pope Francis addressed conference participants on the social teaching of the Church. He then said, among other things: *Striving to overcome problems such as hunger and food insecurity, persistent social and economic distress, the degradation of ecosystems, and a 'culture of waste' calls for a renewed ethical vision, one that places persons at the center, desiring to leave no one on the margins of life.* The pope reminded also that the work of building up a person-centered, integral ecology is both a "call and a task." The task, he said, *is to change "models of global development" to those that "promote economic, environmental and social*

<sup>6</sup> Francis (Pope), Apostolic Exhortation *Querida Amazonia* (February 2, 2020).

*solidarity and sustainability within a more humane economy which considers not only the satisfaction of immediate desires but also the welfare of future generations.*<sup>7</sup>

## Internet data analysis

The second part of my presentation I would like to spend on some data analysis. The company “Newspoint” (Ms Aleksandra Kamińska) conducted a study on the appearance of the expression “ecological conversion” (in Polish – “nawrócenie ekologiczne”) on Polish internet portals in the period from the encyclical “Laudato si” (May 24, 2015) until the end of October 2020. Here are just few general conclusions.

First of all, this expression is not very popular. In the analyzed period, it appeared on Polish portals only 1002 times (for five years).

The topic of ecology, and thus also ecological conversion, appeared in the Church in Poland before Pope Francis. Nevertheless, after the encyclical “Laudato si”, the Church in Poland clearly began to become increasingly “green”. Already a quarter of a century before the encyclical, on May 2, 1989, Polish bishops issued a Pastoral Letter on the need to protect the environment. They appealed, among others for a national examination of conscience in this area and for a revision of the way of life. Two years before the encyclical, on January 16, 2013, the ecumenical “Appeal of the Churches in Poland for the Protection of Creation” was published. It was signed by representatives of the Roman Catholic Church and the Churches associated in the Polish Ecumenical Council.

Three years after the publication of the encyclical (on October 4, 2018 – liturgical commemoration of Saint Francis of Assisi), the Polish Bishops’ Conference issued a letter “For the sake of our common home” (*W trosce o wspólny dom*). It preceded the UN Climate Summit in Katowice (3-14 December 2018). The call to ecological conversion was also included in the Pastoral Letter of the Polish Episcopate for Mercy Sunday 2019 (April 2019), in which, responding to the call of Pope Francis, Polish bishops showed the importance of a modest

<sup>7</sup> Francis, *Address to Participants in the International Conference of the Centesimus Annus Pro Pontifice Foundation* (June 8, 2019), [http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2019/june/documents/papa-francesco\\_20190608\\_fondazione-centesimusannus.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2019/june/documents/papa-francesco_20190608_fondazione-centesimusannus.html) (2020-12-21).

life based on love, not consumption, on counteracting food waste and the donation its surplus to those in need.

In connection with the World Water Day<sup>8</sup> celebrated on March 22<sup>9</sup> in 2020, the bishops of the Upper Silesian-Zagłębie metropolis<sup>10</sup> issued the “Word for the World Water Day”.

### Statistics

Taking into account the websites where the term “ecological conversion” (in Polish “nawrócenie ekologiczne”) appeared at least 5 times in the period we are interested in, we have the following result.

The record holder in this group is the website of the popular Catholic weekly “Niedziela” (Sunday), published in Częstochowa, where texts with the phrase we are interested in appeared 144 times. The second place was taken by the information service “Ekai.pl” of the Catholic Information Agency (KAI), where the phrase “ecological conversion” appeared 80 times in the analyzed period. The portal “Wiara.pl” (Faith) with 60 texts was on the third step of the podium. It is worth to underline that, only church services were included in the top nine. These were the Jesuit “Deon.pl” (49 times), the conservative-Catholic “Polonia Christiana” (31 times), the Warsaw Catholic weekly “Idziemy” (Going) (30 times), the Polish-language website of Radio Vatican (28 times), the website of the popular Catholic weekly from Katowice “Gość Niedzielny” (Sunday Guest) (27 times), the portal of the Warsaw-Prague diocese “Stacja7” (Station 7) (23 times). The tenth place was taken by the first secular portal – the Polish-language edition of “Microsoft News” (Msn Polska) (21 quotations). The top ten includes portals that have included the phrase “ecological conversion” more than 20 times.

The second ten includes portals where the phrase we are interested in appeared less than 20 but more than 10 times. These were again – with three exceptions – Catholic portals: “Frona” (18 times), “Franciszkańska 3 – Solidarność”

<sup>8</sup> On the Catholic teaching on water issues see also: W. Kluj, M. Laskowska, M. Rzotkiewicz, *Access to water as common good of humanity in the context of Catholic social teaching*, in: K. Cichos (et. alii, eds.), *Sustainable Development Goals and the Catholic Church. Catholic Social Teaching and the UN’s Agenda 2030*, Taylor and Francis, 2020.

<sup>9</sup> Established by the United Nations in 1992.

<sup>10</sup> The Archdiocese of Katowice, the Diocese of Gliwice and the Diocese of Sosnowiec.

(17 times), “Radio eM 107” (17 times), “Radio Maryja” (14), “4stars .pl” (14), “wPolityce.pl – Home Page” (12), “misyjne.pl” (11), “Opoka” (11), “Onet.pl” (11) and “KATOLIK.pl” (11).

In the group of portals that referred to the phrase we are looking for less frequently (but more than 5 times), there are essentially secular news portals, this time with three exceptions for Catholic portals. They were: “Niezalezna.pl” (10), “Inecie.pl” (9), “bibula.pl” (8). This phrase was recorded seven times by: “pl.aleteia.org”, “Podlasie24”, “Catholic Guide”, “Polish Press – Home Page”, “Rzeczpospolita” and “Stooq”. The phrase appeared six times on the websites: “Radio Warszawa”, “Telewizja Republika”, “Portal samorządowy.pl”, “Gazeta.pl” and “Wprost”.

### *Content analysis of one-off events*

The encyclical was published on June 18, 2015. Among the first reflections on the encyclical and the phrase “ecological conversion” on the occasion of the publication of the encyclical, one could find an interview with Father Stanisław Jaromi, OFM (a Franciscan from the Ecological Movement of St. Francis of Assisi). There was also a short analysis by Fr. Marian Machinek. They were later discussed on other portals.

Among the first authors who took up this expression and began to reflect on it (noted on Polish portals) was Bishop Grzegorz Ryś, who in his speech on August 10, 2015 referred to ecological conversion. It was also noted that on August 12, 2015, this phrase was used in the speech of Cardinal Peter Turkson (chairman of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace). On August 16, 2015, Archbishop Stanisław Gądecki from Poznań mentioned the ecological conversion during the patronal celebrations in honor of Saint Roch in Mikstat. On August 24, this phrase was quoted by the editor Marcin Przciszewski from KAI, who wrote on the subject of integral ecology. Ecological conversion was also mentioned by Bishop Czaja on October 6, 2015.

In 2016, these words also appeared during the mention of the World Congress on Chemical Safety taking place in Kielce (in April 2016), as well as during the creation of an ecological village in Krakow by “The Global Climate Catholic Movement”.

It can be noted that Pope Francis and the call to ecological conversion were mentioned when the assembly of the Silesian Voivodeship adopted the anti-smog act (April 2017). A similar appeal regarding the protection of the natural environment was announced by the Social Council at the bishop

of Płock (July 2017). Bishop Wiktor Skworc of Katowice also appealed for the rational use of coal resources (December 2017). This bishop, who is the head of a highly industrialized diocese, speaks very often on ecological issues.

Polish portals noted that on the occasion of the World Youth Day in Panama (January 2019) a congress was held, which formulated five postulates to political leaders, appealing, inter alia, to for “ecological conversion”. A similar appeal from the pope himself was made (March 2019) during his trip to Morocco. It was also noted on the Polish Internet that in June 2019 the trainings for diocesan Caritas were inspired by the *Laudato si* encyclical. They also covered the issues of ecological conversion. Polish portals also noted the fact (in November 2019) that many Catholic organizations in the US criticized their country’s exit from the Paris Climate Agreement (of December 2015).

Issues related to ecological conversion have been mentioned many times in connection with the Synod for the Amazon (October 6-27, 2019). The *Instrumentum Laboris*, the debate and the final document were discussed many times. For example, the presidents of COMECE, card. Jean-Claude Hollerich emphasized that the problem of poverty is closely related to environmental issues, which is often the result of the ongoing climate change. Our consumerism of Christians in Europe contributes to the degradation of the Amazon rainforest environment.

The call to ecological conversion also appeared in Pope Francis’s message for the World Day of Peace on January 1, 2020. It was noticed on many websites. It was commented on, among others by Fr. Bruno Maria Duffe, secretary of the Dicastery for Integral Human Development, also by the representatives of the Sant’Egidio Community. During the Holy Mass at the beginning of 2020, this was also referred to by Bishop Marek Jędraszewski from Kraków, Bishop Wiktor Skworc from Katowice, and Bishop Stanisław Gądecki from Poznań. The latter had a special occasion to do so in connection with the celebration of the centenary of the state forests.

In the first months of 2020, a call to ecological conversion appeared on portals in connection with the Caritas workshops for young people from the Częstochowa diocese, in connection with the ecological letter of Bishop Janusz Stepnowski from Łomża, and in connection with the letter for the Lent by bishop Marek Jędraszewski from Krakow.

The coronavirus has dominated the issues since April. On April 8, the Pope was quoted as saying that the pandemic could represent an opportunity for ecological conversion. On April 20 (on the occasion of World Earth

Day – April 22), during the general audience, the Pope said that we need an ecological conversion because we have “sinned” against the earth.

There was information about the week of *Laudato si*, celebrated on the occasion of the fifth anniversary of the encyclical. The most widely recorded event of these celebrations was the document published in the Vatican: “Care for our common home”, dealing with integral ecology. In the background there was information about a series of programs prepared with the World Catholic Movement for the Environment.

In a more secular context, in August 2020 it was mentioned that the interview with the Pope, also on the topic of ecological conversion, will be conducted by the famous French actress Juliette Binoche.

### *Cyclical events*

Several times a year, there were occasions to summarize the pontificate. It was always at the end of the year, on the anniversary of the election of Pope Francis (March 13, 2013), during his birthday or name day. The encyclical *Laudato si* was often mentioned and quoted at that time, and the phrase “ecological conversion” appeared frequently.

Since 2015, September 1 has been celebrated in the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church as the Day of Prayer for the Protection of Creation. It became an opportunity to remind the Catholic understanding of ecology, so every year on this occasion, the phrase that interests us appeared. This day is associated with the formation of the Global Catholic Climate Movement. The chairman of the Polish section of this movement – Piotr Abramczyk, spoke many times on ecological issues, also talking about “ecological conversion”.

Other occasions were also a pretext to talk about ecological conversion. In 1972, the United Nations established June 5 as World Environment Day. Since this date is close to the publication date of the encyclical *Laudato si* (June 18), the celebration of World Environment Day was always associated with the anniversary of the encyclical.

Another occasion to present papal teaching about ecological conversion was the annual Ecological Debt Day. In 2019, it was already on July 29. In his messages in 2016 and 2019, the Pope mentioned not only ecological conversion, but also “ecological sin”. Commentators, on the other hand, spoke of an “ecocide” or “ecological debt” between the North and South of the world. Its restitution would require caring for the environment of the poorest countries, providing them with financial resources and technical assistance that would

help them cope with the consequences of climate change and promote sustainable development.

Polish “green” initiatives mentioned in portals include e.g. the annual “Creatio continua” conferences held since 2018 at the Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow. An interesting idea is the publishing (since October 2019) the weekly “Catholic Guide” (Przewodnik Katolicki) from Poznań on FSC (Forest Stewardship Council) certified paper. In September 2020, the Chemin Neuf Communities also organized the Laudato Si Weekend in Łódź, during which there was also a talk about ecological conversion.

### Summarizing internet data analysis

Summarizing this part of the article about internet data analysis, it can be stated that, generally, the issue of ecological conversion presented on Polish internet portals was not related to missions. On the other hand, however, the question of caring for all creation drew attention to the reality of human life on other continents. There were some indications of the appeals of bishops from various countries. Polish portals noted the calls for ecological conversion proposed by bishops from Congo (January 2017), Sierra Leone (August 2017), the Philippines (July 2019), Belgium (also July 2019), Cameroon (March 2020).

From the missionary (and missiological) perspective, it is worth emphasizing the activity of the “misyjne.pl” portal. Although the term “ecological conversion” appeared on their websites only 11 times, it was still more than on other mission websites, such as “misje.pl” of the Polish Episcopal Commission for Missions, or “missio.pl” of the Pontifical Missionary Works. Even there, however, these were mainly repetitions from other websites. Among many peoples related to the issue of “ecological conversion”, only two missionaries were quoted: Fr. Kasper Kaproń OFM from Bolivia and Fr. Józef Gwóźdz SVD from Nicaragua / Panama.

### Conclusion

Even though the phrase “ecological conversion” may still sound strange in Poland in the context of theological and missiological reflection, it refers to the same exhortation which we found in Jesus’ teachings. Faith in Jesus Christ is always the essence of the missionary message. This faith is lived in the community and the human community lives in a certain environment. Lack

of concern for a good living environment shows chaos in the heart of the individual, and hinders or even prevents good, healthy relationships. It is necessary, therefore, to undergo a change of heart and mind, restoring our relationship with ourselves, with peoples and with the whole creation in order to restore our relationship with God. At least this is what we find in the teaching of Jesus Christ. For this we need a serious conversion, starting from the level of intellect.

Without the use of such expression, these activities have been, and since the Second Vatican Council even more have been increasingly, part of the daily activities of particular missionaries and of the various missionary institutions. It should, therefore, also be part of a systematic missiological reflection. In the last few years, many missiological conferences dedicated to the issues of mission in relation to the natural environment have been held. Our publication can also be a small contribution to this discussion.

The ecological crisis we find ourselves in is an expression of a deeper problem within us. The consumer society convinces us that joy and happiness can be found when we grow up in possessing material goods and amassing wealth. Hyper-consumerism is causing chaos in the environment and in the heart of a given person. The ecological crisis, therefore, calls to a profound inner ecological conversion. Only by working together can we bring about a lasting change. Therefore, this ecological conversion must also be a communal conversion, calling all of us to work together.

The encyclical of Pope Francis' *Laudato si* remains at the level of the whole missionary Church and the level of the whole world the greatest document with a spiritual as well as a political dimension that presents the ultimate horizon of faith in Christ and ecology. As the call to conversion was at the heart of Jesus' teaching at the very beginning of His teaching, now Pope Francis' call to ecological conversion is the beginning of a new stage in the Church's mission today.

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# Laudato si' and Mission

## A historical background

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In May 2009, the Commission of Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation of USG/UISG (Unions of both male and female Superior Generals) and SEDOS organized a three-day seminar in Assisi (Italy). The theme was: *Creation in the heart of mission*. Around 240 men and women from more than 50 countries participated, mostly members of Catholic missionary congregations. During the seminar, a booklet was presented, with the title: *Earth Community: In Christ through the Integrity of Creation towards Justice and Peace for All*.

What was the journey that brought these missionaries to subsequently issue a common statement that they felt “the call to embrace an ecological commitment, and assume a lifestyle that reveals our inner sense of oneness with the Earth and to the God who creates in Christ Jesus”?

## The modern environmental movement

The Canadian Jesuit priest, philosopher, and theologian Bernard Lonergan once commented that the Church always arrives “a little breathlessly and a little late” for debates about social issues. This certainly applies to the ecological debate. Environmental degradation was first put on the political agenda by secular movements and organizations.

In the second half of the 20th century, it became increasingly clear that human activity was severely damaging the natural environment. When *Silent Spring*, Rachel Carson's book on the devastation caused by synthetic pesticides, was published in 1962, it led to widespread concern about the environment and outrage over the fact that nobody had prevented such serious pollution in the first place. Many consider her book to have spurred the beginnings of a global environmental movement.

Besides pollution of water, soil and air, other serious environmental concerns surfaced. In *The Limits to Growth*, published in 1972, the Club of Rome warned that humanity could not continue to exploit nature without serious consequences for humanity and Earth itself.

The United Nations started discussing environmental issues seriously in the early 1970s, after the first UN Conference on the Human Environment in 1972. UN commissions published influential reports, like the 1987 report entitled *Our Common Future*, which stressed the interdependence of nations in the search for a sustainable development path. The reports famous definition of sustainable development was "development which meets the needs of current generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs". In the decades that followed, there were influential environmental conferences, like the Rio Conference in 1992 (also known as the Earth Summit). At the start of the new millennium, *The Earth Charter* was published, which was meant "to inspire in all peoples a sense of global interdependence and shared responsibility for the well-being of the human family, the greater community of life, and future generations."

The limits of what the UN could accomplish also became clear. The decision-making process is extremely complicated and lengthy, and national interests play a big role. Furthermore, the UN lacks the means to force countries to keep to agreements that are made.

In view of the growing concern worldwide about the environment, it was inevitable that the Church would also address environmental issues. How did the Church respond to the above-mentioned "signs of the times"?

## Justice, peace and integrity of creation

In the wake of the Second Vatican Council, Pope Paul VI established the Pontifical Commission for Justice and Peace in 1967. Care for creation was not yet

explicitly on the agenda of the new pontifical commission. But in 1971, Pope Paul VI called environmental degradation “a tragic consequence” of unchecked human activity<sup>1</sup> and called for “a radical change in the conduct of humanity,” because unless progress is “accompanied by authentic social and moral progress, it will definitively turn against man.”<sup>2</sup> Another powerful statement early on was issued by the World Synod of Bishops in their 1971 document *Justice in the World*. It talked about “listening to the cry of those who suffer violence and are oppressed by unjust systems and structures, and hearing the appeal of a world that by its perversity contradicts the plan of its Creator.” It mentioned how interdependent the world is: “We have to respect the delicate biosphere of the whole complex of all life on earth, which must be saved and preserved as a unique patrimony belonging to all human beings.”<sup>3</sup>

It took quite some time, however, before the Catholic Church explicitly made “care for creation” a fundamental issue for Catholics. The World Council of Churches took the lead when it initiated the “Conciliar Process of mutual commitment to justice, peace and the integrity of creation” in 1983. In view of the arms race, widespread poverty and the degradation of the environment, the World Council of Churches wanted Christians to take a common stand on the urgent issues concerning the survival of humankind. Many members of Catholic religious institutes were deeply influenced by the Conciliar Process.<sup>4</sup> Religious institutes added “integrity of creation” to the agenda of their justice and peace committees, which were renamed “Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation (JPIC)” committees.

Nevertheless, according to a Mill Hill missionary I interviewed, environmental issues remained “the little stepsister” of justice and peace issues for a long time. This is illustrated by the fact that the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church that was published in 2004 by the Pontifical Council

<sup>1</sup> Apostolic letter *Octogesima Adveniens*, No. 21.

<sup>2</sup> Address to the FAO, November 16th, 1970.

<sup>3</sup> *Justice in the World*, paragraph 8.

<sup>4</sup> The Society of the Divine Word (SVD) for example, decided at its 1988 General Chapter: “We should be a dynamic force, in cooperation with other religious congregations and the whole people of God – laity and hierarchy – in encouraging the local churches to participate in the movement ‘Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation’. This movement was initiated by the General Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Vancouver, Canada, and is known as the ‘Conciliar Process’.”

for Justice and Peace barely mentions issues like climate change or biodiversity. Likewise, as Piotr Krakowczyk CMF pointed out,<sup>5</sup> the Union of Superiors General of religious women and men, when they organized the Congress on Consecrated Life in 2005, failed to address the serious ecological situation in the world, either in the *Instrumentum Laboris* or in the Final Document („*Passion for Christ, Passion for Humanity*“, 2005). He also pointed out that the two leading journals in the English-speaking world dedicated to religious life – *Review For Religious*, published in the USA, and *Religious Life Review*, a Dominican journal being published in England – paid hardly any attention to the ecological crisis between 2000 and 2007.

So, the attitude of both the Church and religious institutes of consecrated life towards the ecological crisis remained ambivalent for quite some time. On the one hand, it was clear that human activity caused much ecological destruction; on the other hand, it took a long time before the awareness dawned that this was something that directly touches on our faith. Why was it so hard for the Church to connect the dots between faith and care for creation?

## The ecological conversion of mission

In 1967, historian Lynn White argued in his well-known essay *The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis* that the reason why especially Western societies have abused the natural world is because of their grounding in the Judeo-Christian worldview. The very first chapter of Genesis states that God made man in his own image and gave him dominion over the earth and “over every living thing that moves on the earth.” According to White, this led to an approach in which nature has no value apart from what it provides humankind. Thus, humans felt free to exploit nature.

One could argue whether these few verses from Genesis form the main basis of the Judeo-Christian worldview, as there are many other verses in the Bible that give a more balanced view of the relationship between humans and the rest of creation. As a practicing Christian, White was not out to demonstrate how destructive and outdated the Christian worldview is. If nothing else, he

<sup>5</sup> Piotr Krakowczyk, *The World Seems to be Falling Apart: Violence, Injustice and Ecological Degradation*, SEDOS Bulletin 41 (2009), p. 125-133.

wanted to point out how anthropocentric Christian thought and practice had become over the last couple of centuries.

This anthropocentrism affected European mission activities as well. When Christian missionaries travelled to all continents in the 16th and later centuries, European religion and culture were considered the God-given norm and were imposed on people through catechesis and education. They regarded other religions as pagan, and their practices and beliefs were considered idolatrous. Cosmic religiosity was suppressed.

The main key towards transforming this prevailing anthropocentrism and regaining the sense of unity and interdependence of all creation was therefore to place humanity firmly within creation. The development within Christian thinking of an alternative way of looking at nature and our place in it happened in a variety of ways.

Creative thinkers like the Jesuit Teilhard de Chardin and Passionist priest Thomas Berry played an influential role in this transformation, especially in the Anglo-Saxon world. They urged humans to recognize their place on a planet with complex ecosystems in a vast, evolving universe. They stressed the intrinsic value of creation, not just its usefulness to humans. Many religious were inspired by their vision. They developed a more ecologically sensitive spirituality and practice. As early as 1980, American Dominican Sister Miriam MacGillis co-founded Genesis Farm in New Jersey, one of the first ecological centers founded by religious. Afterwards, many other ecological farms, earth learning and retreat centers were founded, mostly by women's congregations in the USA and Canada, and through their missions also in other continents.

Another path was taken by Third World theologians who came to a new appreciation of the religious and cultural heritage of Asia, Africa, and Latin-America through their analysis of colonialism and the unholy alliance of historical Christianity and European-North American power. An unjust world order, which caused widespread poverty and ecological disaster and served the interests of the rich, impelled them to re-examine theology and spirituality. In their search for a spirituality based on the dignity of every person and on social and cosmic interdependence, they discovered that there was a deep affinity between traditional spiritual practices and religious beliefs and the Biblical worldview. A group of Asian and African theologians who came together in 1992 in Colombo (Sri Lanka), described their communal search in a strong statement, *African and Asian Spirituality – New Awareness and Orientation*. They stated: "The ecological crisis and women's protests and

the cry of the dispossessed are now forcing us to acknowledge the futility of attempts to coerce nature into submission with the wizardry and abstractions of our science and technology. They are forcing us to go back to our cosmic and social roots in order to recoup our radical earthiness and to re-establish our symbiotic relationship with the rest of creation.”<sup>6</sup> This quote also shows the affinity between the contextual theologies developed in the Global South and feminist theologies in both North and South.

Another path towards a more holistic worldview that I want to mention here is the new appreciation of ancient mystical traditions in the light of the ecological crisis. The most obvious person to turn to was of course Saint Francis. Gearóid Francisco Ó Conaire, secretary general of the JPIC commission of UISG/USG, wrote in the January 2008 issue of the SEDOS Bulletin: “Saint Francis by his life and his loving relationship with creatures is a beacon of hope for an alternative way of relating to the whole of Creation and a sign of hope for a sustainable way of life. For one who holds all life to be sacred, wanton destruction is unthinkable. We do not generally damage or consciously endanger family members. Francis challenges us to treat other creatures as family.” Australian theologian Denis Edwards, one of the main speakers at the 2009 conference in Assisi, also pointed to the Benedictine tradition of *stabilitas loci* and the patient and careful care for the natural surroundings that it implies. One could also mention the great women in the tradition of Western mysticism, like Hildegard von Bingen, who held everything in the cosmos to be one.

## Citizens of the world

Towards the end of the 20th century, many religious institutes of consecrated life started making the link between their mission and integrity of creation more explicit. At general chapters, members from different parts of the world started reporting how seasons were increasingly hard to predict, thus making it very difficult for farmers to grow food; how especially poor people suffered from pollution and severe storms, as they were the ones living close to polluted areas and their dwellings were not strong enough to withstand heavy rain or storms.

<sup>6</sup> African and Asian Spirituality (Cosmic and Indigenous) – New Awareness and Orientation, Consultation Statement, June 1992.

Religious institutes became aware that they, too, were contributing to the destruction of their environment and that an adjustment was necessary. They started making efforts to pull away from a consumerist lifestyle and to live a simpler life “in order that others might simply live.” According to the younger missionaries I interviewed, by the late 1990s it had become commonplace in their institutes to recycle, to reduce their use of energy, to minimize the use of plastics and to segregate waste. In addition to this, they made efforts to move towards clean energy sources and in many cases also got involved in campaigns and lobbying for the environment.<sup>7</sup>

Missionaries realized that human welfare is not possible if people live in a degraded environment. The Medical Missionary Sisters, for example, had been aware early on about the need for eco-friendly living. At their General Chapter of 1997 they made ecology an integral part of their mission. They expressed this by talking about the “ecological dimension of our healing mission,” thus also expressing their commitment to addressing systemic injustice.

Among many religious men and women, awareness grew that all creation and life is interconnected and that their mission to share “life in fullness” encompasses not just all people, but all of creation. Besides all the practical lifestyle steps they took, some religious also made efforts to contribute to a holistic, integrated spirituality and theology in relation to the integrity of creation.

The fact that many missionaries witnessed firsthand the destructive forces of the neoliberal global system made them extremely critical of the way the more industrialized countries were trying to lessen their own ecological problems by exporting them to poorer countries. Dumping toxic industrial waste and buying up large tracts of farmland for monoculture have been examples of this. Thus, ecological awareness gave new meaning to their prophetic role. José Cristo Rey Garcí'a Paredes CMF articulated this as follows: “Our identity is planetary and global. We are citizens of the world. The Creator has given to each one of us a global citizenship. [...] There is no reason for a human being to be the enemy of another human being: we are not “national” beings, with frontiers, wars and weapons. We have been given an artificial identity, which is not real; and this artificial identity has been given to us by those organizing

<sup>7</sup> The Missionary Sisters of the Holy Spirit (SSpS), for example, remarked at their General Chapter of 2008: “We are challenged to move: – From consumerism to conscientious use of resources, – From exploitation to eco-responsibility, – From inactive awareness to active involvement in systemic change.”

the world for their self-enhancement, to feed their avarice, their ambition and personal profit.”<sup>8</sup>

Piotr Krakowczyk wrote in similar terms: “We cannot remain silent, complacent or indifferent to what is happening in front of our eyes. We have to make a stand against all forms of violence by proclaiming that Christ is “our peace” (Eph 2:14). We need to remind the world that profit has its limits, namely when it causes the misery of other human being and rapes the earth of its resources. It is by God’s spirit that the world can be saved from destruction and “not by might, nor by power” (Zech 4:6); an alternative world can only be built on kindness, justice, and righteousness.”<sup>9</sup>

When SEDOS and the JPIC Committee of UISG/USG held their 2009 seminar in Assisi, there was therefore already a growing consensus that “responding to the cry of the Earth and the cry of the poor is at the center of Christian discipleship,” as was stated in a letter that was sent out at the end of the conference to all religious communities. The letter encouraged religious congregations “to embrace the call to love the Earth and its creatures as God loves it” in their formation programs, their liturgies, their own renewal programs and in apostolic engagements. They also encouraged them to work together with those organizations and movements that struggle to defend the rights of the planet and the rights of the poor and marginalized. The statement ended with a confession of guilt: “Recognizing our own ecological sins and complicity in the abuse of the Earth, we ask forgiveness and we propose our actions as means of reconciliation and solidarity.”<sup>10</sup>

## From Aparecida to Laudato si’

It can be argued that the Fifth General Conference of the Latin American and Caribbean Bishops” Conferences in Aparecida (Brazil, 2007) sowed the seeds for Laudato si’. At this conference, the Archbishop of Buenos Aires, Jorge

<sup>8</sup> José Cristo Rey García Paredes CMF, *Mission In a Mutating World and in Front of a New Planetary Consciousness*, SEDOS Bulletin, January-February 2008.

<sup>9</sup> Piotr Krakowczyk, *ibid*, p. 132

<sup>10</sup> The statement was included in the SEDOS Bulletin that appeared after the May conference, in the July-August issue, p. 220.

Bergoglio, was elected editor-in-chief of its final document. Six years later, Cardinal Bergoglio was elected pope and chose the name of Francis to express his solidarity with the poor and with creation.

Pope Francis claims that his “ecological conversion” started at Aparecida. As the Latin American bishops were working on the final text, he was taken aback somewhat by the way the Brazilians insisted that proposals be included on the destruction of the Amazon region. They were very concerned by the destructive capacity of the “present economic model” of development, which, they said, was responsible for an “irrational exploitation” of natural resources and the endangerment of millions of people and their habitats.<sup>11</sup> In the final document, the bishops mentioned care for creation as one of the “new aeropogi”: an issue singled out as having “particular relevance” for the missionary impulse of the Church in the coming years.<sup>12</sup>

When Pope Francis decided to publish an encyclical on integral ecology, he asked Cardinal Peter Turkson to get together a team of experts to work on a draft text. The making of an encyclical is usually shrouded in mystery, somewhat similar to how a pope gets elected. But there is some information available. There is at least one direct link between the 2009 seminar in Assisi and the genesis of *Laudato si'*. Seán MacDonagh, Columbian priest and ecologist, who was one of the main speakers at the 2009 conference, was asked by Cardinal Turkson to participate in the team of experts working on the new encyclical. Asking him was a remarkable move, given the fact that he had had a longstanding argument with Turkson’s predecessor Cardinal Moncino over climate change.<sup>13</sup>

The themes that Pope Francis mentions at the end of the preface to his encyclical *Laudato si'*, and which run throughout the text, reflect many of the insights that missionaries expressed several years earlier. He mentions the intimate relationship between the poor and the fragility of the planet, the conviction that everything in the world is interconnected, the critique of new

<sup>11</sup> Gerard O’Connell, *Pope Francis on the ‘ecological conversion’ that led him to ‘Laudato Si’*, “America Magazine” (2020-09-03).

<sup>12</sup> Gearóid Francisco Ó Conaire, *Mission and Ecology – Christian Mission in the Light of an Environment Under Threat*, SEDOS Bulletin, January 2008.

<sup>13</sup> See: <https://www.greenfoundationireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/5-Sean-McDonagh.pdf>, p. 3. In fact, Moncino ran a Vatican conference on climate change in 2007 and invited several American climate sceptics to participate.

paradigms and forms of power derived from technology, the call to seek other ways of understanding the economy and progress, the value proper to each creature, the need for forthright and honest debate, the serious responsibility of international and local policy, the throwaway culture of modern society and the proposal of a new lifestyle.<sup>14</sup>

Pope Francis was very candid about the fact that one of his motives for publishing *Laudato si'* early on in 2015 was to have an influence on the important Climate Summit that would take place at the end of 2015 in Paris. In spite of the fact that the Church arrived “a little breathlessly and a little late” for the debate, quoting Bernard Lonergan SJ again, he was thus able to play an important role in the outcome of this summit. Some of the more insightful voices within the ecological movement had for a long time been seeking the input of religious leaders, as they realized that technology, politics or economics alone could never bring about the impetus needed to make fundamental changes in the way the world is run. They realized that churches and faith communities have a tremendous potential to contribute towards integral development by being global communities that tap into ancient sources of wisdom. There are quite a few commentators who claim that the encyclical tipped the scale at the Paris Climate Summit towards a positive outcome.<sup>15</sup>

## *Laudato si'* and mission

Pope Francis’ choice to make the mystical connection that Saint Francis felt with all of creation the spiritual cornerstone of his encyclical was very effective. On the one hand, it made the central message of the encyclical easily understandable for the many Catholics who are familiar with this saint. On the other hand, it enabled him to easily circumvent problematic theological questions about the relationship between humanity, the divine and creation.<sup>16</sup> Using

<sup>14</sup> See paragraph 16 of *Laudato Sí*.

<sup>15</sup> See: <https://lisd.princeton.edu/publications/impact-laudato-si%E2%80%99-paris-climate-agreement>.

<sup>16</sup> The fear of theological unorthodoxy may be one of the reasons why especially male theologians and religious initially have been wary of embracing integrity of creation as an important part of Christian witness. P.M. Fernando, MA, for example, published an article in the September-October 2009 issue of the SEDOS Bulletin, arguing that “Eco-spiritualities

Saint Francis as example, the pope moved beyond the traditional Christian notion that humans are “stewards of creation” (he uses this term only twice in *Laudato si'*) and talks mostly in terms of interconnectedness and communion, much like the religious did in their *Earth Community* brochure. In doing so, he made an important step towards transcending the anthropocentric kind of thinking that Lynn White criticized in 1966.

The simple claim in the second paragraph of *Laudato si'* that creation “is among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor” makes it easy to connect care for creation with Catholic social teaching and its insistence that the needs of the poor and vulnerable must be taken into account and have priority.<sup>17</sup>

This claim also opened the way for Pope Francis to include care for creation in 2016 as one of the works of mercy, which have always been the cornerstone of Catholic social practice. He explained his decision by pointing out that “the object of mercy is human life itself and everything it embraces.” This, he added, “requires simple daily gestures which break with the logic of violence, exploitation and selfishness and makes itself felt in every action that seeks to build a better world.”<sup>18</sup>

*Laudato si'* is remarkable also for its synodal approach and ecumenical openness. Part of its strength comes from the fact that it builds on the insights and experiences coming from all parts of the Church. The many citations from pastoral letters of National Conferences of Bishops attest to this. *Laudato si'* is ecumenical in the original Greek sense of the word, *oikoumenikós*, which means “the entire world“. Pope Francis seeks cooperation, not only with other Christian denominations, but with other faith traditions, sciences and the arts as well. The encyclical has therefore great significance for mission, not only

[...] tend towards pantheism. [...] the pantheistic ideas are being transformed into a new set of myths like “Community of all Beings“, ‘Cosmic-consciousness“, ‘Gaia” or the ‘Matrix of life“, and ‘Integrity of Creations“.”

<sup>17</sup> In a similar way, SVD missionary Thomas Malipurathu connected dialogue with care for creation in an article for the SEDOS Bulletin in 2007: “The whole Creation, with its divinely ordained richness and diversity, becomes our partner in dialogue. It is true that missionary outreach is primarily addressed to human beings in all situations of need. But human beings are intimately linked to their physical environment. Our desperately endangered environment deserves to be considered as a situation of need calling for committed action.”

<sup>18</sup> Message for the second ‘World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation“, Sept. 1st, 2016.

because of the fact that it deals with some of the most urgent issues of our time, but also because of the methodology it proposes of dialogue and cooperation with others.

The *Earth Community* booklet that was published in 2009 by the organizers of the Assisi conference was mainly aimed at religious institutions and was much more limited in scope and ambition. Yet, *Laudato si'* confirmed many of the insights and perceptions of the “ecological pioneers” within religious institutions. Many religious men and women who had worked hard for many years to raise awareness of ecological issues within their Church and faith communities were deeply grateful for the encyclical. A Medical Missionary Sister I interviewed shortly after the publication of *Laudato si'* told me she felt vindicated by the encyclical. For years, she had been a pioneer in the field of ecological spirituality in the Netherlands. Even in her community, there were at that time still questions about her focus on ecology, considering that this came at the cost of looking after people. “This new encyclical unmasks this false contrast,” she told me. “The Pope involves all aspects of human life: cultural, social, political and economic. Everything belongs together.”<sup>19</sup>

## The emergence of a common understanding

*Laudato si'* gave new impetus to the awareness within dioceses, religious institutes and Catholic organizations that climate change and ecological disasters make life problematic for millions of people. Many Catholic missionary development organizations now explicitly refer to *Laudato si'* when mapping out their policies and explaining them to others.

The Vatican continues to stress the importance of integrity of creation for the life of the Church and for the world at large. Five years after the publication of the encyclical, the Pope announced a *Laudato si'* Special Anniversary Year. When he did this on May 24th, 2020, he explained that “the cry of the earth and of the poor has become more shrill and more heartbreaking.” There is a strong sense of urgency, he said, as the scientific community and the worldwide movements of young people have been reminding us that we are running

<sup>19</sup> Gerard Moorman, *De roep van de Aarde horen*, Missionaire Agenda, September 2015, p. 6.

out of time. Pope Francis told executives of oil and energy companies during a meeting in 2019 at the Vatican: “Our children and grandchildren must not pay, it is not just that they should pay the price of our irresponsibility.”

The fact that the Special Anniversary Year is taking place during the COVID-19 pandemic has only underlined the fact that we cannot live healthy lives if our relationship with the planet and its ecosystems is not healthy. As many scientists agree, the origin of the virus has to do with human interference in the complex equilibrium of natural ecosystems through the trade in wild animals and through deforestation.

Through a seven-year program, the Vatican hopes to encourage Catholic families, parishes and dioceses, religious orders, movements, schools and universities and health institutions to take bold steps towards integrating care of creation in all aspects of their life and policies. Perhaps the fact that some of the most polluting nations have pulled out of the Paris Agreement plays a role in the decision to give extra impetus to grassroots movements, as they are a more stable force working towards sustainable change.

The Catholic Church is notoriously slow when it comes to change. There is still much work to do to change hearts and minds within the Church itself. There are many who fail to understand that caring for our environment is an important way in which we can put our faith into practice. Yet, many key figures within Catholic institutions are aware of the urgent need to protect Earth and are willing to act accordingly. *Laudato si'* seems to have definitively opened the way for the Church and missionary institutes to include integrity of creation as an integral part of their mission. One of the missionaries I interviewed used the word “noosphere“, popularized by Jesuit priest Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, to describe the shared notion of many religious nowadays that all life on Earth is interconnected and that humans are not apart from nature, but form part of nature.

## Conclusion

The reaction of the Catholic Church and most Catholic institutes to the ecological crisis was ambivalent at first. On the one hand, Church leaders recognized the seriousness of the ecological crisis. On the other hand, it took decades before this concern led to policy changes and, more importantly, to a change in theology and spirituality. A new appreciation of cosmocentric lines of thought

within Christian tradition and outside of it, led to a growing awareness that all life on Earth is interdependent and interconnected.

Laudato si' confirms what "ecological pioneers" within the Church had been saying and doing for decades, and has stimulated ecological awareness for the whole Church. The simple fact that Laudato si' places integrity of creation firmly within the body of Catholic social teaching makes it all but impossible to ignore the fact that it forms an important if not crucial part of the mission of the Church. As with any process of change, the "ecological conversion" of the Church will take time. The publication of Laudato si' in 2015 has been an important step on the way to greater consciousness, but the process must be ongoing.

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# “Everything in the world is connected” (LS 16)

## Indigenous Knowledge in a Mission for Eco-justice

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*“Tudo está interligado, como se fôssemos um.”* – “Everything is interconnected, as if we all were one.” During the Bishops’ Synod for the Amazon, in 2019, this song was repeated over and over again, because this idea was one of the principal motifs of the consultations. “Everything is interconnected”, also Pope Francis had written already in *Laudato Si’* and had concluded “that genuine care for our own lives and our relationships with nature is inseparable from fraternity, justice and faithfulness to others.” (LS 70)<sup>1</sup>

This intricate interconnectedness between ecology and justice, between humans and nature, between the conservation of natural resources and the justice between peoples, between everyone and everything, is so endangered in our times that the Pope urges the Church and the world desperately to convert to a profound respect of everyone and everything and to the fact that everything is interconnected.

<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis, *Encyclical Letter Laudato Si’ of the Holy Father Francis on Care for Our Common Home*, Vatican City, May 24, 2015.

Pope Francis does so presenting as an example, as witnesses and as a model the indigenous people of the planet:

While the existing world order proves powerless to assume its responsibilities, local individuals and groups can make a real difference. They are able to instil a greater sense of responsibility, a strong sense of community, a readiness to protect others, a spirit of creativity and a deep love for the land. [...] These values are deeply rooted in indigenous peoples. (LS 179).

In this contribution, I will briefly summarize the urgency of present-day challenges to ecology and justice in the world, show the relevance of these challenges for a conversion of praxis and methodology of Mission, and then present some elements of an indigenous contribution to a praxis of responsibility for everyone and everything that are present in the pope's magisterium in *Laudato Si'*. The fact that the Pope refers to Indigenous wisdom and proposes it to the world as part of a solution to the present crisis, shows – in my judgement – that he is practising his own concept of mission as listening. I will conclude with Pope Francis' call to a missionary conversion, which includes a conversion of Mission.

## Our house is on fire

Our house is on fire. Not only Greta Thunberg and the Fridays for Future movement are alerting us constantly to the fact of the urgency of the state of our planet's destruction. We can literally see the fires in the Amazon, in California, in Australia, and in many other parts of the world, if we turn on the news on television or the internet. And it is not only the fires: Global warming, hurricanes, droughts, floods, pollution of air, water, and land, loss of biodiversity, and what Pope Francis calls "the breakdown of society" (LS 43) show us clearly, that our house, our "common home" (LS 17) is in serious danger.

It has been widely recognized that Pope Francis, in *Laudato Si'*, links ecology to justice.<sup>2</sup> "The cry of the earth and the cry of the poor" (LS 49) are

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Ó. Martín / C. M.M. Bartolomé Ruiz, *Querida Amazonía: La Ecología integral de la Laudato Si'*, in: "Misiones Extranjeras" 294 (2020), p. 337-361; A. Lienkamp, *Die Sorge für*

intrinsically linked to each other. The poor are not the ones most responsible for the destruction of ecology. Yet it is the poor who have to suffer both the consequences of a greedy and murderous economy (cf. EG 53)<sup>3</sup> and of the ravage of their environments. It must be clear, therefore, that we cannot save the environment without constructing justice for the poor, and on the other hand, neither can we provide economic and social justice if we continue to exploit natural resources.

In *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis attributes the roots and causes of our present-day crisis to “the technocratic paradigm” (LS 106) and to “anthropocentrism” (LS 115). Contemporary ecofeminist thinkers would add to these androcentrism, or patriarchy, and dualism.<sup>4</sup> One of the main causes of the ecological and social crisis can be identified as the opposition, in European thought, between subject and object, humans and environment, man and woman, culture and nature, the West and the rest.<sup>5</sup> These binaries are always

*unser gemeinsames Haus! Herausforderungen der bahnbrechenden Enzyklika Laudato si' von Papst Franziskus* (Linzer Beiträge zu Wirtschaft – Ethik – Gesellschaft 8), Linz 2016; M. Heimbach-Steins / A. Lienkamp, *Die Enzyklika “Laudato Si’” von Papst Franziskus. Auch ein Beitrag zur Problematik des Klimawandels und zur Ethik der Energiewende*, in: “Jahrbuch für Christliche Sozialwissenschaften” 56 (2015), p. 155-179; E. López Hernández, *Comentando la encíclica Laudato Si desde la perspectiva indígena*, in: <https://observatorioeclesial.org.mx/2015/07/13/comentando-la-enciclica-laudato-si-desde-la-perspectiva-indigena-eleazar-lopez-h/> [2015] (4.11.2020); A. M. Clifford, *Pope Francis' Laudato Si', On Care for our Common Home: An Ecofeminist Response*, in: “Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America” 72 (2017) p. 32-46; S. Silber: *Pluralität, Fragmente, Zeichen der Zeit. Aktuelle fundamentaltheologische Herausforderungen aus der Perspektive der lateinamerikanischen Theologie der Befreiung* (Salzburger Theologische Studien 58, interkulturell 19), Innsbruck/Wien 2017, p. 103-106.

<sup>3</sup> Pope Francis: *Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Gaudium*, Vatican City, November 24, 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. M. Mies / V. Shiva, *Ökofeminismus: Die Befreiung der Frauen, der Natur und unterdrückter Völker. 2., überarbeitete, aktualisierte und erweiterte Ausgabe*, Neu-Ulm 2016; M. Mellor, *Feminismo y ecología*, Mexico 2000; A. Graneß / M. Kopf / M. A. Kraus, *Feministische Theorie aus Afrika, Asien und Lateinamerika* (utb: Gender Studies 5137), Wien 2019 268-303; I. Gebara, *Intuiciones Ecofeministas*, Madrid 2000; M. J. Ressa, *Sin visiones, nos perdemos: Reflexiones sobre Teología Ecofeminista Latinoamericana*, Santiago 2012.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. S. Hall, *The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power*, in: S. Hall / D. Held / D. Hubert / K. Thompson (ed.), *Modernity. An Introduction to Modern Societies*, Cambridge, Mass. 1996, p. 184-227; S. Silber, *Poscolonialismo. Introducción a los estudios y las teologías poscoloniales* (El tiempo que no perece 3), Cochabamba 2018.

conceptualized as antagonistic and as subordinated: One can dominate the other – and should do so in order to enable progress.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to this, in capitalist societies, everything is transformed not only into an *object*, but also into a *value*: It can be sold and bought; everything and everyone can be attributed a price. This is another profound technocratic transformation of creation: Nothing and nobody was created as an object of value. Everything was created free of charge and not subject to economic value.

Ecofeminist theory denounces this dualist conceptualization of reality as one of the main roots of modern destruction of ecology, subordination of women, exploitation of the poor and colonization of the Global South. In natural disasters, “it is women who are disproportionately affected”<sup>7</sup>, as ecofeminist theologian Anne Clifford says, and it is poor women in former colonized countries, as we could add: The destruction of nature is interlinked to the suffering of poor women in the Global South.

It is therefore necessary to include a feminist approach into the global analysis of our present crisis presented by the pope. The “cry of the earth” and the “cry of the poor” is also a cry against the exploitation and subordination of women, against sexual violence, and against the double impoverishment of women, recognized by the Pope in *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG 212). Without a profound attention towards the deep interrelation between patriarchy, industrial society, colonialism and the destruction of the ecosystem, it is not possible to chart a solution to our present crisis.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Cf. S. Silber, *La casa común en llamas. La conversión ecológica precisa una conversión epistemológica*, in: L. M. Romero Chamba / R. Tomichá Charupá (eds.), *Sinodalidad: Realidad socioeclesial y perspectivas misionológicas* (Reencantando la misión 6), Cochabamba 2020, p. 213-220.

<sup>7</sup> A. M. Clifford, Op. cit., p. 34.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. S. Silber, *Alles ist miteinander verbunden. Lernen von der Amazoniensynode*, in: “Euangel. Magazin für missionarische Pastoral” 2020, no. 1, in: <https://www.euangel.de/ausgabe-1-2020/nachhaltigkeit-und-schoepfungsverantwortung/alles-ist-miteinander-verbunden/> (2020.11.04).

## Listening is more than simply hearing

According to the teaching of Pope Francis, listening is a new paradigm for mission.<sup>9</sup> Mission can no longer be conceived as the annunciation of a message already known or the transposition of a faith already established. Mission must include the willingness and the praxis of listening. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, the pope writes:

We need to practice the art of listening, which is more than simply hearing. Listening [...] is an openness of heart which makes possible that closeness without which genuine spiritual encounter cannot occur. Listening helps us to find the right gesture and word which shows that we are more than simply bystanders.” (EG 171)

Only by listening can the Church’s mission “find the right [...] word”. So if mission today, in a common home which is on fire, can have any meaning at all, it must listen to the voices and cries of those endangered by the blaze. This is what *Laudato Si’* stands for and calls upon. Pope Francis alerts us to the cries of the poor, the earth, the nature, of all of creation and implores us to listen with “openness of heart”.

In the Final Document of the Amazon Synod, the bishops confess that “listening to the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor and of the peoples of the Amazon with whom we walk, calls us to a true integral conversion” (#17)<sup>10</sup>. It is quite surprising to read the bishops affirm, that they, bishops of the Roman Catholic Church, have been called to conversion. We have been too accustomed to bishops – and other clerics – calling other people to conversion, especially in missionary contexts, that this episcopal confession strikes a powerful chord.

So mission, as conceived by the pope and by the Synod of Bishops, means listening and preparedness to one’s own conversion. This new concept of mission is enclosed in what the pope presently calls the principle of synodality

<sup>9</sup> Cf. S. Silber, *Synodalität, Befreiung, Widerstand. Neue Perspektiven für die Missionstheologie*, in: “Theologisch-praktische Quartalschrift” 168 (2020) no. 3, p. 262-270.

<sup>10</sup> Synod of Bishops, Special Assembly for the Pan-Amazonian Region, *The Amazon: New Paths for the Church and for an Integral Ecology. Final Document*, Vatican, October 26, 2019.

in the Church.<sup>11</sup> Pope Francis calls us to listen to the cry of the earth and of the earth's poor. We need to listen also to those who speak on behalf of these cries: advocates of human rights and of the "rights of nature"<sup>12</sup> which still urgently need to be conceptualized more deeply. We need to listen to the scientists who describe the ecological and social catastrophe we are facing, and to the social and popular movements of the people who defend their rights and their lives.

And we need to listen to women and feminists. This is one of the seriously critical points that have been brought forward regarding *Laudato Si'* and other papal documents. Anne Clifford recognizes that Pope Francis cites many important authors in his encyclical, including "noteworthy non-Catholic men", albeit only two women are mentioned by name: "Mary, the Mother of Jesus [...] and Thérèse of Lisieux"<sup>13</sup>. Moreover, "although the word 'women' appears in *Laudato Si'* eleven times, it occurs only in the context of speaking of both 'men and women.'"<sup>14</sup> But listening must not exclude women. If the Church fails to listen to female and feminist theologians, and to women in general, how can listening be that open-hearted practice that Pope Francis proposes? How can we pretend to be listening, if 50% of humankind and precisely those more likely to suffer as victims of ecological injustice, are not to be heard?

The Amazon Synod undertook some important steps in the spiritual practice of listening: During a long preparatory period, about 80.000 persons were involved, among them representatives of 170 indigenous peoples. More than 53% of the registered participants were female.<sup>15</sup> During the process of preparation, the Synod listened even to members of the indigenous people who were not baptized. Their voice was included into the preparatory documents, and the Synod *wanted* to listen to it. There were female and indigenous participants of the Synod, and according to numerous testimonies, they shaped its discussions and outcomes. The almost complete absence of women's voices

<sup>11</sup> Cf. S. Silber, *Synodalität, Befreiung, Widerstand*, Op. cit., p. 262-265.

<sup>12</sup> E. Gudynas, *Derechos de la Naturaleza. Ética biocéntrica y políticas ambientales*, Buenos Aires 2015.

<sup>13</sup> A. Clifford, Op. cit., p. 35.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. *Informe. Proceso de consulta sinodal de la Red Eclesial Panamazónica REPAM*, in: [https://redamazonica.org/wp-content/uploads/INFORME-camino.recorrido.REPAM\\_Sinodo..pdf](https://redamazonica.org/wp-content/uploads/INFORME-camino.recorrido.REPAM_Sinodo..pdf) [2019] (2020.11.04).

from the post-synodal apostolic exhortation of Pope Francis was therefore again a step backwards from the path undertaken by the bishops.<sup>16</sup> This is not how you set a good example.

In my own opinion, the significance of listening in mission must extend even further and must include the resistance we encounter in the praxis of mission.<sup>17</sup> The people who are supposed to be recipients of what we call mission often reject it and resist to it. I believe that it is important to listen to this resistance, because it might be justified. It might be a reaction to a false practice on the side of the missionaries and a genuine call to our conversion. In line with this thought, the Second Vatican Council said that “the Church admits that she has greatly profited and still profits from the antagonism of those who oppose or who persecute her” (GS 44). Resistance might be a call of God to the missionaries to evaluate and change their strategies. Even in this extreme case, listening can lead to a spiritual ‘openness of heart’.

## Indigenous Knowledge for Eco-justice

While listening to the voices of women still seems to be a challenge for the pope, Francis proves in *Laudato Si’*, and afterwards during the Amazon Synod and in *Querida Amazonia*, that listening to indigenous voices matters very much to him. In *Laudato Si’*, we can even ascertain that Pope Francis makes use of indigenous knowledge and wisdom to propose attitudes, strategies and measures for new ways of implementing eco-justice.<sup>18</sup> This is important, because it shows that the pope urges the world to learn from indigenous knowledge, world view and even ontology, which differs greatly from European ontology,

<sup>16</sup> The Pope certainly cites, in *Querida Amazonia*, some women: Ana Varela Tafur, Amarilis Tupiassú, Yana Lucila Lema, and Sui Yun. But his arguments are not inspired by them, nor does his text reflect any influence of female or feminist theologians. Cf. S. Silber, *Alles ist miteinander verbunden*, Op. cit.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. S. Silber, *Synodalität, Befreiung, Widerstand*, op. cit. 267-270.

<sup>18</sup> While Ó. Martín and C.M.M. Bartolomé Ruiz, Op.cit. p. 354, argue that Pope Francis does not go beyond the use of European ontology in *Laudato Si’*, although they consider it urgent to do it, in my opinion, he already transgresses the borders of Western thought, although he may cite mostly European authors.

and maintains that this will help us to find the right solutions to eco-justice in the present-day multiple crisis.

We do not find, in the encyclical, a complete analysis of indigenous world views, which would be an impossible task. Neither does the pope explain clearly that he is referring to indigenous wisdom. In the following paragraphs, however, I will compare some of his arguments in *Laudato Si'* with indigenous world views, as I had the opportunity to learn while I was living in the Bolivian Highlands. In my judgement, it is possible to demonstrate the closeness of the pope's line of argument to indigenous knowledge and propose a certain probability that Pope Francis not only listened to indigenous people, but made their wisdom, their philosophy, their spirituality of an ecological relation to nature his own.

### “Everything is interrelated” (LS 70)

One of the major transversal threads in *Laudato Si'* is the idea that “everything in the world is connected” (LS 16). Pope Francis repeats and modifies it various times, but shows also that in his own perception, “as part of the universe, called into being by one Father, all of us are linked by unseen bonds” (LS 89). This complex interrelationship between all creatures “implies”, in the words of the pope,

a relationship of mutual responsibility between human beings and nature. Each community can take from the bounty of the earth whatever it needs for subsistence, but it also has the duty to protect the earth and to ensure its fruitfulness for coming generations. (LS 67)

‘Mutual responsibility’, in the Spanish original of the encyclical, is literally ‘responsible reciprocity’, a fraternal mutuality between the partners in this relationship that excludes any form of domination, exploitation or even superiority. Reciprocity is also the term used by anthropologists to describe the quality of relationships in the indigenous world view.<sup>19</sup> Another central term

<sup>19</sup> Cf. S. Chipana Quispe, *Teología y Buen Vivir*, in: Fundación Amerindia (ed.), *Congreso Continental de Teología. La teología de la liberación en prospectiva. Tomo I: Trabajos científicos*,

in indigenous anthropology, ‘complementarity’, is also reflected by the pope: “No creature is self-sufficient. Creatures exist only in dependence on each other, to complete each other, in the service of each other” (LS 86). Human beings cannot live without other beings; they are deficient and need the complement of other elements of creation. And vice versa, humans must serve creation, they must not dominate, but complement other creatures with which they are interdependent. A third central term to characterize indigenous perception of interrelatedness is gratuitousness, the unpaid and unmerited gift of relation and responsibility every part of the global web of interrelations receives and needs to give. Pope Francis writes:

This same gratuitousness inspires us to love and accept the wind, the sun and the clouds, even though we cannot control them. In this sense, we can speak of a ‘universal fraternity’ (LS 228).

This profound interrelatedness of everything created, in mutual responsibility and complementarity, that we need to receive and give freely, is the reason why the pope warns against “an excessive anthropocentrism” (LS 116) at the heart of modern society and economy. Human beings are not the centre of the universe, but only one of God’s many creatures that are intended to interrelate with all other creatures.

This is very much in line with indigenous thought as it is shared and lived in the Andean Highlands. In the Andean world, there is no distinction between animate and inanimate nature. Mountains, springs and stones are involved in the relationships of mutual harmony. Human beings and their communities are part of the natural world and are not opposed to it. Relationships of harmony need also to be lived with the future and the past, with the deceased and those not yet born.

Bolivian indigenous theologian Sofía Chipana Quispe points out that this indigenous wisdom of interrelatedness and mutuality integrates radical political and social consequences:

On the one hand, a critique of the contemporary socio-economic situation, and on the other, the proposal of a cultural, social, and political reconstruction, parting from the reconciliation between nature and humanity, between material and spiritual realms, recognizing a plurality of contributions that can share in the critique of capitalism and in the construction of much more alternative societies, in which the grand community of life, of which we are part, is being valued and taken care of.<sup>20</sup>

Chipana cites, as an example, Ecuadorian economist Magdalena León, who urges to construct human economy around the central axis of life and of care, for humans and for nature.<sup>21</sup> In Latin America, there exist already multiple very concrete proposals for ecology, economy, politics and theology based on the indigenous principle of interrelatedness.<sup>22</sup> Pope Francis' call for respect and responsibility fits perfectly into this dialogue between indigenous wisdom and modern discourse. The indigenous conviction of interrelatedness of all things created can help us to heal the divisions of our current ecological and social crisis.

### “Each creature reflects something of God” (LS 221)

Another element of indigenous knowledge that we can notice in *Laudato Si'* is the pope's conviction that “we can see God reflected in all that exists” (LS 87). Pope Francis argues with the theology of Thomas Aquinas, and he strictly rejects the notion of a divine character of nature (cf. LS 78), nevertheless he writes that every single creature has a message, is “a caress of God” (LS 84). It is possible to find God in every being, and therefore, we must respect everything and care for it. Pope Francis intends to raise

<sup>20</sup> S. Chipana, *Op. cit.*, p. 239.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 237; cf. León M., *Después del “desarrollo”: “el buen vivir” y las perspectivas feministas para otro modelo en América Latina*, “Revista Umbral” 18 (2008), p. 35-44.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. S. Silber, *Kirche*, p. 197-203.

the awareness that each creature reflects something of God and has a message to convey to us, and the security that Christ has taken unto himself this material world and now, risen, is intimately present to each being, surrounding it with his affection and penetrating it with his light. (LS 221)

Although in *Laudato Si'*, there is no mention of a divinity of nature, as we can find it in many indigenous cultures, it is also obvious that Pope Francis insists on the presence of God in each of his creatures and, as he writes citing the Brazilian Bishops,

that nature as a whole not only manifests God but is also a locus of his presence. The Spirit of life dwells in every living creature and calls us to enter into relationship with him. (LS 88)

These ideas bring Pope Francis very close to an understanding of the relationship between God and creation as it is expressed in panentheism, the idea of God's presence in everything, and to the divinization of Nature in indigenous thought. Sofia Chipana, while relating indigenous thought to ecofeminism, expresses clearly how close the pope's ideas are to the ones expressed in this new development in indigenous and feminist theologies:

In this new paradigm, there is a sensibility of the sacred in every reality of the universe, because it is assumed that God is in everything and everything in God (panentheism). While God and Creation are distinguished, God is understood as intimately connected to Creation and vice versa. But in this experience, an ethical demand is attached, which involves the integral healing of the earth, that means, it includes healed relationships between women and men, between classes and nations, between human beings and the earth.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>23</sup> S. Chipana, *Op. cit.*, p. 255.

In Andean thought, as the Swiss philosopher Josef Estermann writes, “there is no fracture, no separation between a ‘profane’ and a ‘religious’ sphere. Everything has to do, in a way, with the ultimate mystery of life.”<sup>24</sup> It is because of this intimate sacredness of reality that Andean people relate with reverence, care, and awe to every part of it. Víctor Bascopé, another indigenous theologian from Bolivia, explains:

We Andean people approach this universal reality, *Pacha*, with respect, tenderness, and reverence: expressions, that surge from the heart of our Andean being. We converse with every one of the existing realities of *Pacha*.<sup>25</sup>

If we would approach nature “with respect, tenderness, and reverence”, as befits a divine reality or, at least, a reality where God’s presence can be experienced, this would stop us effectively from destroying and exploiting it.

### “A kind of universal family, a sublime communion” (LS 89)

As everything in creation is interconnected and enables us to connect with the Creator, Pope Francis invites us to live according to “a sense of deep communion with the rest of nature” (LS 91). It is a communion that links us to the whole of nature in ways that resemble the metaphor of the body used by St. Paul to describe the Church (1 Cor 12:12-30). The Pope repeats in *Laudato Si’* a statement made already in *Evangelii Gaudium*:

God has joined us so closely to the world around us that we can feel the desertification of the soil almost as a physical ailment, and the extinction of a species as a painful disfigurement. (LS 89)

<sup>24</sup> J. Estermann, Op. cit., p. 92.

<sup>25</sup> V. Bascopé Caero, *Espiritualidad originaria en el Pacha Andino. Aproximaciones teológicas*, Cochabamba 2006, p. 5f. *Pacha*, in Bascopé’s interpretation, means the universality of reality, earth, space, time, the soil, nature as a whole, as well as a concrete place and moment.

The communion of the Church appears to be transformed into a universal communion that includes every single creature, humans, animals, plants, earth, wind, and water. Francis describes this communion already in *Laudato Si'* as a “fraternity [which] excludes nothing and no one” (LS 92). In his recent encyclical “*Fratelli Tutti*”, Francis elaborates deeper on fraternity as a new model for a global society in many aspects.<sup>26</sup>

In very similar terms, Víctor Bascopé explains how unity in the Andean universe is conceived and achieved:

Nothing exists in an isolated form or in an indifferent way in the *Pacha*. Each reality reaches its reason of existence and being in the process of fulfilment in the *Pacha*.<sup>27</sup>

This unity in the universe follows what Bascopé calls “the principle of harmonious order”<sup>28</sup>. If every element is in its place, fulfils its own purpose, and lives according to the multiple links it maintains to every other being, this universal order is in harmony and balance.

On the other hand, many Andean myths and rituals deal precisely with the challenge of what to do when this order is or has to be broken, because this harmonious order is always in motion and in danger and therefore allows and sometimes requires human intervention. As a living whole, everything in creation cannot stay the way it is, because nature, life and death, everyday and catastrophic events always bring changes with them.<sup>29</sup>

Every disturbance of this order, every negligence in reciprocity, every violation of complementarity or interrelatedness upsets the precarious cosmic equilibrium. The consequence can be a disease, a drought or an earthquake. In order to avoid this, or to make amends in the event of damage, rituals symbolically restore complementarity, trusting relationships and grateful giving and receiving. Part of this ritual process are the healing of social and political relationships, the resolving of conflicts, and the restoration of justice.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Pope Francis, *Encyclical Letter Fratelli Tutti on the Fraternity and Social Friendship*, Assisi, October 3, 2020.

<sup>27</sup> V. Bascopé, *Op. cit.*, p. 13.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 14-16; S. Silber, *Kirche*, *Op. cit.*, p. 196f.

This restoration and recreation of equilibrium is something quite different from the European notions of development and progress. While these lead to a succession of unlimited growth, consumption and exploitation, with neoliberal capitalism imposing “a logic of unlimited production and promoting an unequal distribution of resources through what it calls market liberalization and its self-regulation by constant competition”<sup>30</sup>, as Brazilian scholars Martín and Ruiz criticize, Pope Francis proposes a conversion from this paradigm of constant progress:

There is a growing awareness that scientific and technological progress cannot be equated with the progress of humanity and history, a growing sense that the way to a better future lies elsewhere. (LS 113)

The communion of a universal order of harmony and balance is always a precarious and dynamic one. Pope Francis and indigenous wisdom would coincide in this and would call for strong and determined action on behalf of the recreation of justice and balance in the universe. We cannot conclude from this coincidence that the pope has converted to an indigenous world view or religion. But it should have become transparent, that in *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis demonstrates that he has been listening to the experience, the wisdom and the knowledge of indigenous people. He gave an example of what it means to practice mission as dialogue and open-hearted listening.

In *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis urges everyone to listen to indigenous voices and indigenous knowledge as he does and to learn from their wisdom what needs to be learned urgently in order to find sustainable solutions to our present ecological and social crisis, and to finally achieve eco-justice.

### *Mission contributes to the conversion of the Church*

Listening open-heartedly to others is not an obvious practice in the Church and in mission. This may be the reason why Pope Francis, from the beginning of his ministry as pope, called for a “missionary conversion” in the Church

<sup>30</sup> Ó. Martín / C.M.M. Bartolomé Ruiz, *Op.cit.* p. 344.

(EG 25)<sup>31</sup>. This missionary conversion can be linked to the “ecological conversion” (LS 216) demanded by the pope in *Laudato Si’*. These conversions are not only changes in attitude or practices. They must include profound theological and structural reforms within the Church to enable synodality, openness, and dialogue and to revert to the confession of the Second Vatican Council that declared that “the Church believes she can contribute greatly toward making the family of man and its history more human.” (GS 40)

Today, the Church must contribute to the construction of eco-justice and the respect for the whole and every part of creation. This is the most urgent challenge to humanity and to the Church in our times. Listening to indigenous wisdom, as performed by Pope Francis, the Church will be able to convert to the interrelatedness of creation and to the presence of the Creator in it.

If mission is practised as listening, as we have seen in the example of the pope in *Laudato Si’*, it can contribute deeply to a more profound understanding of reality, to a more spiritual conception of creation, and to the development of a helpful self-criticism in the Church, its structures and its members. This is why the pope, in his message for World Mission Day 2019, admits the significance of mission for the conversion of the Church: “The *missio ad gentes*, which is always necessary for the Church, thus contributes in a fundamental way to the process of ongoing conversion in all Christians.”<sup>32</sup>

The Church, like the bishops of the Amazon Synod, is called to conversion. Mission, realized with a heart open to attentive listening, can be very important for this conversion of the Church. If we conceive missionary praxis no longer as a means to convert infidels, but to let ourselves be converted, we will have done a large step forward towards a conversion of mission.

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<sup>31</sup> Cf. S. Silber, *Kirche*, Op. cit., p. 259f.

<sup>32</sup> Pope Francis: *Baptized and Sent: The Church of Christ on Mission in the World*. Message for World Mission Day 2019, in: [http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/missions/documents/papa-francesco\\_20190609\\_giornata-missionaria2019.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/missions/documents/papa-francesco_20190609_giornata-missionaria2019.html) (2020.11.04).

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# Eco-sensitive Answers from Africa, Asia and Latin America

The precious contribution from the non-western  
world to ecological renewal

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## Introduction

Centuries of uncontrolled exploitation have devastated life on planet Earth, and the survival of both humans and the environment as a whole is being threatened.<sup>1</sup>

Ecological challenges are no longer issues, they demand a credible response from the global community. The answers cannot be found without integrating social-cultural, economic, political and spiritual-religious reflections of human-kind in its various contextualized expressions.

<sup>1</sup> K.R. Gnanakan, *Creation and Ecology*, in: W.A. Dyrness and V.-M. Kärkkäinen (eds.), *Global Dictionary of Theology*, Downers Grove, Illinois – Nottingham, England, 2008, p. 207-208.

Representatives of worldviews and views of life need to engage with their scriptures and sources in order to re-understand and re-interpret them in the context of today's ecological challenges. This is the only way to find new insights for the future, which will become life-giving designs for the people of today's world.

## Eco-sensitive reflections from Africa

Already in 1985, an African viewpoint on *Ecology: an untapped resource of Pan-Vitalism in Africa* was published. There the Ghanaian author writes: "One of the problems facing contemporary Africa is ecological disaster. The African faces a crisis in his or her relation to nature. Years of ecological mismanagement: over-grazing, deforestation, uncontrolled and indiscriminate poaching, and similar errors of sufficient magnitude, have placed the entire African continent on the brink of total ecological disaster. Africa cannot feed herself anymore."<sup>2</sup> Asante explains that "Pan-vitalism is the belief that everything in the universe has life... The African concept of pan-vitalism suggests that nothing in the universe is inanimate for the African."<sup>3</sup>

The author continues by indicating that theological reflection is in the African world-view a part of overcoming the ecological crisis. Therefore, the author can claim:

Today the environmental issue has become a concern not only of the natural sciences but also of the theological enterprise. There is the need, therefore, for African theologians to exploit this gem of pan-vitalism, a *gem* from their own African heritage as their quota towards a solution to the ecological problems facing contemporary Africa.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> E. Asante, *Ecology: untapped resource of Pan-Vitalism in Africa*, "AFER" 27 (1985) no. 5, p. 289.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 289-290.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 293.

Emmanuel Asante affirms: “And yet, at the heart of Africa’s view of the world, is a religious *gem*, awaiting potency of belief in pan-vitalism, whose critical and theological enhancement could contribute towards the solution of this disaster.”<sup>5</sup>

In Africa Sub-Sahara, ecological arguments always call for balance between human wants and environmental balance such that traditional cultural and religious conventional values sustain the ominous dynamics to avoid further deterioration of ecology.”<sup>6</sup> writes a Zambian theologian. “In spite of the external influence on black African worldview and perhaps internal poverty levels that lead to overlooking some of the previously forbidden acts, there has been a lot of effort to respond to the impact of ecological degradation and climate change.”<sup>7</sup>

Evaristo Chuya is convinced that: “Black Africans need a concerted effort to combat ecological degradation. The answer to the future of ecological values lies in the hands of black Africans themselves: empowerment, formation and sense of ownership.”<sup>8</sup>

## Urbanization, industrialization, migration movement and the ecological crisis

We cannot have any meaningful eco-sensitive reflection, if we do not look at the repercussions of urbanization, industrialization and migration in African

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 289.

<sup>6</sup> E. Chuya, *The Future of Black African Ecological Values: A new sense of environmental responsibility in pastoral sensitivity for ecological conversion*, Sedos Bulletin, 2020 (in preparation).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.; Laurenti Magesa writes: “The African imagination must be put to work in the formulation and construction of democratic theories and institutions that are relevant to the cultural and political history of the continent.”, in: L. Magesa, *Africa’s Struggle for Self-Definition During A Time Of Globalization*, “AFER” 40 (1998) nos. 5-6, p. 330.

societies and the impact these powerful movements have on the relation of African people with nature.

Urbanization ultimately pollutes the rural areas... Rural development projects in food or cash crops fail, because urban-based ruling elite pay farmers prices that are too low to provide an incentive to make better use of resources.<sup>9</sup>

Urbanization and industrialization have caused massive rural depopulation, that is the enormous migration wave towards the cities inside their own country, but even beyond national borders to cities worldwide.

The continuing flood of urban migrants in Africa produces a kind of social erosion which widens the gulf between rich and poor... The migrant becomes a non-person, a surplus individual, an illegal and unwanted intruder in the eyes of the affluent, established urban dweller.<sup>10</sup>

According to this significant observation the question of Christian eco-sensitive reflection has to include the question of ecological crisis in African countries in correlation with its urbanization, industrialization and migration process. For African Christians this question cannot be separated from their religious worldview. At the centre of the reflection therefore will be the question of an adequate understanding and praxis of evangelization in African churches and Christian communities.

There is, however, no way in which the tide of urbanization can be turned back. ... The task of the Church in Africa is the evangelization of a continent in the process of rapid urbanization... If the Gospel of Christ is to make a lasting impact in Africa, it will be because it has helped the urban process to become less invidious and less unjust, more human

<sup>9</sup> A. Shorter, *Urbanization: today's missionary reality in Africa*, "AFER" 32 (1990) no. 5, p. 291.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 292.

and more enduringly creative. It will have given the African town a soul.<sup>11</sup>

The Senegalese female philosopher and theologian Anne Beatrice Faye investigates the *The Concept of Creation in the African World View* and raises the question: *Is Laudato Si' a Gift to Africa?* In her reflection Faye looks at how the concept of creation in Africa can help to restore the relationship between man and his natural environment as well as his economic, social and spiritual environment. Faye points out the importance of the importance of respect for nature and calls for a much greater awareness of the links between ourselves and our ecosystem as a location and source of fertility; a society in which there is peace not only between human beings, but among all forms of life; a struggle against all forms of hegemony, domination, power and disparagement; and respect for nature. For Faye, the African way of being a part of creation is a major expression of the African worldview that helps to evaluate the impact of human action on the ecosystems and correct man's asymmetrical relationship with nature by transforming it into a symbiotic relationship. Faye claims that: "In Africa, people believe they are closely related to the cosmos. No one doubts the kinship between man and plants."<sup>12</sup>

The Ghanaian theologian Moses Asaah Awinongya explains us how biblical images and Ghanaian cosmologies go hand in hand, creating a new perspective.

The combination of biblical images with Ghanaian cosmologies is intended to arouse Christians' desire to nurture a creation spirituality which has the power to help people take better care of the living environment inhabited by all creatures and to encourage them to praise their creator. While all other living beings look after their own, man is the only creature who also maintains a relationship with the creator.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 300; cf. E. M. Akhong'o, *Responsible Stewardship of the Earth's Resources*, "AFER" 36 (1994) no. 3, p. 181-186; cf. L. Magesa, *Africa's Struggle for Self-Definition During A Time of Globalization*, "AFER" 40 (1998) no. 5-6, p. 320-332.

<sup>12</sup> A. B. Faye, *The Concept of Creation in the African World View: Is Laudato Si' a Gift to Africa?*, in: K. Krämer – K. Vellguth (eds.), *Creation. Living Together in our Common House*, (One World Theology, vol. 11) Quezon City 2018, p. 150.

As a result, he not only practises a spirituality of togetherness, but also a spirituality of mutual concern. This is linked to solidarity with all other creatures.<sup>13</sup>

## Eco-sensitive reflections from Asia

The German theologian Klaus Vellguth is convinced that awareness of ecological issues has increased in India in recent years. For him the Encyclical Letter *'Laudato Si'* fall in Asian Catholic churches on fertile ground. Especially Catholic pastoral institutes in Asia responded to it creatively.

The South Indian theologian Felix Wilfred says: "The major concern of public theology is defence of freedom from despotism of faith and state, the defence of the poor against the market, creation harmonious with true sense of community, and care and protection of the environment."<sup>14</sup>

For the South Indian Jesuit liberation theologian Michael Amaladoss, the development of ecological trust is of high importance.

This vision of trusteeship may be the best way that we can promote a certain commitment to protect creation. Creation is not simply a collection of objects at our disposal for our use and enjoyment. It is God's gift to humanity to serve as a framework for their lives. We are not owners of the gifts of creation, but their trustees... The fullness and joy of our own life depends on it... We cannot believe in the resurrection of the body, without believing in the resurrection of the earth too – though we do not know how (and when).<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> M.A. Awinongya, *Creation Spirituality. Answers from the Church in Africa*, in: K. Krämer – K. Vellguth (eds.), *Creation. Living Together in our Common House* (One World Theology, vol. 11), Quezon City 2018, p. 187.

<sup>14</sup> F. Wilfred, *Developing a Public Theology in Response to Common Issues in Asia* (Conference Talk, Network Pastoral Asia, Johor Bahru, Malaysia, 4<sup>th</sup> November 2019).

<sup>15</sup> M. Amaladoss, *The Social Perspective on Localism* (Conference Talk, Network Pastoral Asia Meeting, Johor Bahru, Malaysia, 6<sup>th</sup> November 2019).

The South Indian theologian Mohan Doss from the Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth, the Pontifical Institute for Theology in Puna explains:

“Some religious traditions have been accused of being traditionally concerned with the paths of personal salvation which frequently stressed other worldly goals to the detriment of caring for the present world.”<sup>16</sup> The author shows the rich Indian Religious Experience: “The cultures and life style of the indigenous people in India bear testimony to a continuous life process that binds together human beings and nature, animals and gods. Their perception of nature, their relatedness to nature and to one another, their religio-social and cultural expressions reveal a symbiotic relationship with nature and a holistic vision of life. Indian religious experiences of nature synthesized in different faith traditions powerfully bring out the interrelatedness of humans with the whole of creation.”<sup>17</sup>

The Indian theologian Ken R. Gnanakan writes on Eco-theology from a biblical-theological perspective. “Creation perspectives for ecotheologies are required, but Christians have to ground their theology in Jesus Christ and his relationship to creation.”<sup>18</sup> He argues further that “Humans must restore right relationships. God’s creation is held together by an intricate network of relationships... While Christians have strongly emphasized a right relationship between humans and God, and also among humans, they have not advocated right relationship between humans and God’s creation. This urgently required. Christians have seen that anthropocentric relationships have been the cause for ecological disaster.”<sup>19</sup>

For Gnanakan “humans must restore right relationships” and develop “responsible stewardship”, since they are part of God’s creation. The “new creation” community that believers are is placed firmly within the context of the “creation” community and has the responsibility to discover and demonstrate eco-relationships, which must lead to a demonstration of eco-spirituality in the world today.”<sup>20</sup>

<sup>16</sup> M. Doss, SVD, *Promoting an Eco-Just Humanity: An Interfaith Exploration*, in: J. Thomas/V. Sagayam/D. D’Souza (eds.), *Promise of Indian Pluralism and Solidarity*, Delhi – Puna 2011, p. 150.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 172.

<sup>18</sup> K.R. Gnanakan, *Creation and Ecology*, in: W.A. Dyrness and V.M. Kärkkäinen (eds), *Global Dictionary of Theology*, Downers Grove, Illinois – Nottingham, England, 2008, p. 211.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 212-213.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

## The contribution of the Church in Asia: FABC documents and papers

The final document of the Fifth Plenary Assembly of the FABC of July 27, 1990 is often called the *Asian Pastoral Constitution* since it has had a similar importance for the Asian churches as *Gaudium et Spes* had for the worldwide Catholic Church. In this document the bishops give us a differentiated analysis of the socio-cultural, political, economic and religious situation in which the people of Asia have to live their Christian faith. They do not hesitate to mention the social evils they experience in Asia like massive poverty, exploitation of the women, overexploitation of natural resources, the lack of perspective for the young generation. In the same document the Asian bishops declared: "In the face of the massive problems engendered by social change and in the face of massive poverty, we can discern, however, many signs of hope."<sup>21</sup>

The Asian bishops listed also the many positive signs which give reason for hope, such as a new consciousness of solidarity, the increasing number of people fighting for human rights, democratization and interreligious and ecumenical dialogue. "Dialogue between religious traditions, the ecological movement, and aspects of the women's movement offer hope for a more holistic spirituality."<sup>22</sup>

The Asian Bishops at their tenth Plenary Assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) in 2012 in Vietnam searched for new ways of evangelization. The rich result of this conversation is published in the fifth volume of *For All the Peoples of Asia* under the title *FABC at Forty Years: Responding to the Challenges of Asia. A New Evangelization.*<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup> *Hope at the Crossroads*, in: G. Rosales, C.G. Arevalo (eds.). *For All the Peoples of Asia, FABC Documents from 1970-1991*, vol. 1, Manila 1997, p. 277.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, p. 278.

<sup>23</sup> *FABC at Forty Years: Responding to the Challenges of Asia, A New Evangelization, X Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Plenary Assembly, Final Statement, Xuan Loc & Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, December 10-16, 2012*, in: V. Tirimanna (ed.), *For all the Peoples of Asia. Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents from 2007-2012*, vol. 5, Quezon City 2014, p. 49-85.

In that document the bishops envision that the church is “a Church in solidarity with the whole of creation”<sup>24</sup> In number 27 the document speaks on Ecology saying: “Natural disasters in various parts of Asia ... bring the ecological question unto the world stage. The old challenge to the integrity of creation had consisted of rapid, indiscriminate and irresponsible deforestation leading to floods, droughts, soil erosion, and loss of life-support systems.”

The bishops are aware of the ethical implications of the ecological crisis, when they write:

Even now hundreds of thousands are ecological refugees as they search for safer places away from floods and rising sea levels. Climate change is wreaking havoc on agricultural production and on sources of livelihood. We in Asia are becoming increasingly aware and concerned regarding the ecological problem and its ethical implications.<sup>25</sup>

The Asian bishops recognize the need for collaboration of their local churches with the civil society. For them, “awareness, concern and action on the ecological challenge are being brought down to the level of the grassroots.”<sup>26</sup>

Reflecting on the biblical stories on creation, the bishops claim that

To have dominion over creation is to be responsible stewards of creation. This is the first mandate of solidarity between humankind and the rest of creation. It is at the root of the social and moral principle of the universal destination of created goods.... Having shared his goodness and love with creation and humanity God unconditionally declared all creation as “indeed very good” and affirmed the “integrity of creation.”<sup>27</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 54.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 64-65.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 69.

Among the fundamental principles developed by the Asian bishops' stands at the first place "Communion and Solidarity of All Creation."<sup>28</sup>

The bishops make also an important statement on Responsible Stewardship of the Integrity of Creation:

Humanity is the steward of God's creation responsibly making use of creation for the good of humanity. When the principles of stewardship and the "goodness" or integrity of creation, including its beauty and harmony of order, and the universal destination of created goods are wantonly violated we do grave injustice to creation and to generations yet to come.<sup>29</sup>

The document closes with pastoral recommendations. They also recommend supporting movements and organizations that engage in the defense of life. Here "environmental exploitation" is especially mentioned.<sup>30</sup> They conclude even with a statement on Ecology: "That the entire Church in Asia inculcates a new sense of environmental responsibility among all its members making it part of spirituality, Christian practice and ministry."<sup>31</sup>

Following the recommendation, the FABC bishops made in 2012, Fr. Clarence Devadass, the Executive Secretary FABC Office of Theological Concerns, published in June 2015, the most comprehensive and updated FABC Paper on our issue, called "Towards responsible stewardship of creation an Asian-Christian approach".<sup>32</sup> In the Preamble the author writes: "Ecological issues are paramount among the most urgent to be addressed in our time... It leads to irreversible changes in the eco-system... The search for a solution to this problem cannot be only at political, economic, technological or ethical levels, but requires also a contribution from the religious, spiritual and theological perspectives."<sup>33</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 70.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 72.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 83.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 84.

<sup>32</sup> C. Devadass (ed.), *Towards responsible stewardship of creation an Asian-Christian approach* (FABC Papers No. 146), June 2015.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 1.

Explaining the Asian realities, the paper remarks: “For the peoples and cultures of Asia, the ecological system plays an integral part of their daily lives as it provides them with sustenance, protection, and also a sense of the Divine.”<sup>34</sup>

The document elaborates all the positive wisdom and traditions being part of all the major religions in Asia like Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, and Islam and, finally in the religions of the indigenous peoples of Asia.

These groups have so much to give and to teach (post)modern societies. They have been acknowledged for their environmental consciousness and ecologically-sound way of life, especially at this time when we in Asia experience half of the natural calamities and disasters in the world. Their natural healing practices, communal way of living, as well as their deep spirituality have inspired and challenged people living in globalised societies that have promoted individualism and greed, as well as unhealthy lifestyles.<sup>35</sup>

I believe we should go to learn more from indigenous people, regarding their understanding of the natural world. Their belief could be summed as follows:

1. Belief in Interconnectedness: Indigenous peoples look at life in a holistic and integrated way. The spiritual and the material permeate each other. Nature, culture and cosmos are interconnected and work together.
2. Belief in the Sacredness of all things: Everything is an epiphany of the Divine and there is Divine presence in everything. This is the reason for their deep respect and care for creation and the natural world.
3. Belief in Spirits: The indigenous peoples believe in spirits, both good and bad, who reside in material and natural things. They — especially their shamans — relate with the

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 21-22.

spirits (through their rituals and prayers) and negotiate for community needs and desires.<sup>36</sup>

Christian communities and their leaders and theologians have to enter into dialogue with all religions and especially into dialogue with all Cosmic or Primal religions as they are part of the cultural and spiritual heritage of all indigenous peoples all over the world. There is much they can offer not only to Christians but to all members of contemporary plural and secular societies.

Chapter IV of the FABC Paper 146 deals with the biblical theology of creation as it is expressed in the two narratives in Genesis. One section talks especially about the “Mission of the human being: Stewardship over creation”.

In essence, stewardship means rendering service to God’s order and plan in creation. This stewardship is meant to responsibly safeguard the divine intention of “ecology” in creation. In this the human being has a double task: first of all, it must be responsible to its own “ecology”, namely to take proper care of the goodness of communion of body and the breath of God in it, so that it can be a worthy personality and agent for stewardship; and secondly, it must direct and guide the “ecology”, namely the heart-matter of all creation.<sup>37</sup>

The task of stewardship for creation is an obligation for any human being, it places us all squarely in creation’s ecology today in the face of climate change and climate justice.

## The contribution from Indian Theology

The Indian Moral Theologian, Clement Campos, CSsR, published in March 2017 in *Theological Studies* his article “Laudato Si. An Indian Perspective”<sup>38</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>38</sup> C. Campos, *Laudato Si’: An Indian Perspective*, “Theological Studies” 78 (2017) no. 1, p. 213-225.

According to this scholar from St. Alphonse College in Bangalore, “*Laudato Si’* was received enthusiastically in India”<sup>39</sup>. Not only worldwide known Indian theologians like Felix Wilfred and Michael Amaladoss were full of praise for this document from Pope Francis, but also the Hindu statesman and President of the Universal Society of Hinduism, Rajan Zed, “praised the pope for his call to respect and protect the environment. He appreciated the pope’s highlighting of the issues linking the care for the natural world with justice for the poorest”<sup>40</sup>. Felix Wilfred called it “a jewel in the crown of the social teachings of the Church, and a great contribution to humanity grappling with the environmental crisis”<sup>41</sup>. “Michael Amaladoss found the spirituality of creation in *Laudato Si’* something great, holistic and original: “This is very attractive especially to the Easterners like us.”<sup>42</sup>

Campos quotes also a statement of the Indian Theological Association from 1998 that reveals an authentically Indian perspective and an Indian contribution to worldwide Christianity and Humanity:

A mystical awareness of this inter-relatedness creates an ecosophy, a wisdom that sees the earth as our home. Protection of the environment then, is an ethical imperative that develops out of a mystical perception of the earth as a home in which we experience the life-giving power of the Mother Divine. The spirituality that grows out of this integral perception complements traditional Christian spirituality and raises pertinent questions about the ethics of today’s dominant global economy.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Idem, p. 213.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 214.

<sup>41</sup> Idem, p. 213-214. Quotation taken from F. Wilfred, *Theological Significance of Laudato Si’: An Asian reading*, “Vidyajyoti” 79 (2015) p. 661.

<sup>42</sup> Idem, p. 214. – Quotation taken from M. Amaladoss, *A Spirituality of Creation according to Pope Francis*, “Vidyajyoti” 79 (2015) p. 575.

<sup>43</sup> Idem, p. 217. Quotation from: J. Mattam, J. Kavunkal, *Ecological Concerns: An Indian Christian Response*, Bangalore 1998, p. 139.

Clement Campos gives in the conclusion of his article “a few points about the nature of Indian Christian response to ecological concerns”. Let me quote one of those enlightening points:

We also seek to enter into dialogue with other religions, cultures, and the poor and thus be active participants and co-pilgrims in humanity’s search for truth... In the context of the environment, we need to recover our God-given place as creatures that share a bond of kinship with all created realities; to undertake the task of repairing the wounds inflicted on creation and render justice to the victims of exploitation and greed; to adopt a lifestyle whereby we learn from the Taoist maxim ‘to walk lightly on the earth.’<sup>44</sup>

The Indian Jesuit Mathew Jayanth reflects on *Ecologization of the Theology for Ecclesial Eco-Praxis*. “Religion is an important cultural phenomenon that shapes people’s worldviews and perceptions, hopes and beliefs, attitudes and behaviour, and, thereby, it determines their relation to the environment. How does Christianity envisage this relationship; what are the consequences, what is it that necessitates a different paradigm and what are the processes involved in re-shaping the theological paradigm...”<sup>45</sup>

For Jayanth “the consciousness of our ecological embeddedness calls for an ecologized theology oriented toward ecclesial eco-praxis.”<sup>46</sup> He concludes: “And, finally, in the multi-religious context of India, one of the eminent ways to advance the praxis of eco-justice is dialogue. Since all religions are embedded in nature, ecology can become a shared concern and a source of unity and collaboration among religions. The magnitude of the ecological crisis demands the concerted effort of all to heal our broken world.”<sup>47</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Idem, p. 224. Quotation from D. Carroll, *Towards a Story of the Earth: Essays in the Theology of creation*, Dublin 1987, p. 172.

<sup>45</sup> M. Jayanth, *Ecologization of the Theology for Ecclesial Eco-Praxis*, in: R. Rocha – K. Pandikattu (eds.), *Dreams and Visions. New Horizons for an Indian Church*, Pune 2002, p. 211.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 225.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 226.

## Eco-sensitive reflections from Latin America

“Concern for the future of the planet has become widespread. Debates about the environmental disaster are a reality in the different fields of knowledge... The Amazon is the biome of the planet that still conserves a large part of the original biodiversity. It is also the largest biome on the planet in territorial extension – the biome extends over eight different countries – and in biological density of living species.”<sup>48</sup>

The Synod on the Amazon is really a watershed divide leading to fundamental new perspective on ecological issues in Latin American churches.

Indeed, the peoples of the Amazon invite Christians to deepen their ecological spirituality, which requires a new hermeneutic of the Word of God with interpretations that value the contribution of each and all cultures, with their own identity, that he listens and learns from the spirituality of ancestral peoples... for the survival of all...<sup>49</sup>

The Latin American people of God has given many theologians and ecologists to human society and Christian communities who have come up with an outstanding eco-sensitive reflection regarding the preservation of the created world and an ecological sustainable society.

Latin-American thinkers in particular and Christians in general are inspired and guided by the papal encyclical *Laudato Si*. The encyclical gained followers far even beyond ecclesiastical circles.

In the LS Francisco includes as fundamental dimensions, in addition to the environmental, the economic, the social, the cultural, the education, the spiritual dimension, the ethics, the transformation of daily life, as well as a theological reading of creation as colophon of the common house...

<sup>48</sup> O. Martin – C.M.M.B. Ruiz, *Querida Amazonia: La Ecología Integral de la Laudato si*, “Misiones Extranjeras” (2020) p. 337.

<sup>49</sup> S.G. Valencia, *El Sinodo de la Amazonia, un acontecimiento profetico y renovador*, “Misiones Extranjeras” (2020) p. 445-457.

The earth is highlighted as a gift from God, that human beings are not its owners, but it is their task to take care of it and respond for it. It rescues from LS 16 that integral ecology is based on the fact that “everything is connected”, that ecology and social justice are intrinsically united (LS 137), and this is what makes it possible to hear the cry of the earth and the poor (LS 49). In short, that integral ecology connects the care of nature with that of justice for the poorest (QA 66).<sup>50</sup>

For Paulo Sergio Vaillant “Laudato Si” proposes a radical inversion of the economic logic of the current reductionist, partial and fragmented market, proposing a new paradigm of Integral Ecology with a broad scientific base, valuing the ancient and millenary wisdom of the native peoples, the teaching that comes from the Biblical writings... This new paradigm also supposes what is currently being built and is called “Economy of Francisco and Clara”, which in *Laudato Si* it is proposed as “common lines of orientation and concrete action”, in which Integral Ecology is in the foreground and the economy and politics are at its service... It is necessary to go through a process of “ecological conversion” at the personal level, but also at the community and institutional level.”<sup>51</sup>

According to Sidnei Marco Dornelas: “The first three chapters of the exhortation “Querida Amazonia” tell us about the three dreams of the Pope: social, cultural and ecological... The social dream of participation and leadership of the poor thus leads to the cultural dream.”<sup>52</sup>

The theologian Dornelas discovers in the Final Document of the Amazonian Synod some important new orientations and proposals for renewing the church’s attitude and involvement in the field of giving some eco-sensitive answers: On the one hand, we have the proposals for the application of the Synod, such as the creation of a socio-environmental and pastoral observatory at the Pan-Amazonian level. On the other hand, the DF indicates its option

<sup>50</sup> O. Martin, C.M.M.B. Ruiz, *Querida Amazonia...*, p. 356-357.

<sup>51</sup> P.S. Vaillant, *La Amazonia e los sueños del Papa Francisco*, “Misiones Extranjeras (2020) p. 368-369.

<sup>52</sup> S.M. Dornelas, *Reflexiones sobre la Exhortación Apostólica “Querida Amazonia” y el Documento Final del Sínodo de la Amazonia*, “Spiritus” 61 (2020) no. 3, p. 95.

in the field of education and spirituality of Christians on issues of moral theology and creation, and presents the proposal of a ministry for the care of the “common home”.<sup>53</sup>

## Conclusion

This reflection on eco-sensitive answers from Africa, Asia and Latin America aims at giving some glimpse of insight into the rich eco-sensitive reflections from those continents.

This could help us to develop a contextualized spirituality of environment and creation, mission and social action. Theology can not only take Scripture and tradition into consideration, but is called to take ecology and the integrity of creation as equally important as part of their reflection. Dialogue means really *being in conversation with*, is much more than just an approach; it is a way of relating and hence living with others as a Christian. The Christian community has to be understood as a relational community which forms its members in the likeness of Christ. Latin American liberation theologians helped to be aware of the dehumanizing effects of social and institutionalized sinful behaviour in humankind and to work for to overcome it.

More and more today, however, humanity is being understood not as the centre of creation but as an integral part of it. Humanity is being understood more and more in the context of *cosmic* wholeness... Mission for the sake of humanity is therefore more and more becoming involved in issues of eco-justice. Only when the cosmos is whole can humanity experience wholeness.<sup>54</sup>

Cardinal Turkson, prefect of the Dicastery for the Promotion of Integral Human Development, thanked at a conference at Assisi “the participants for “bringing light into our dark world,” and for pledging to work toward

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 96.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 70.

a post-pandemic global economy “that is inclusive and sustainable, one that can help us to behave as brothers and sisters living in a common home.”<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> B. Roewe, *Economy of Francesco imagines an inclusive, sustainable world*, “National Catholic Reporter” in <https://www.ncronline.org/news/earthbeat/economy-francesco-imagines-inclusive-sustainable-world> (2020.11.20).

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# Eco-Spiritualities in Dialogue

## Asian Theologies of Creation towards a Shared Responsibility for Creation

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In his environmental encyclical *Laudato si'* published five years ago in May 2015 Pope Francis explicitly stated: "I wish to address every person living on this planet" (LS 3). That is an unusual step for a pope, given that papal encyclicals are addressed first and foremost to Christian followers of the Catholic Church. However, in matters of creation there are no religious, denominational or national boundaries. How the human family can survive on the earth as its common *oikos* was a trans-national, inter-faith issue well before the advent of globalisation. In the interests of our common survival, representatives of religious communities must transcend religious and denominational boundaries and conduct an inter-faith and inter-cultural dialogue on creation.

It was to this issue that Pope Francis devoted his attention in his Encyclical Letter "*Laudato si'* on Care for Our Common Home"<sup>1</sup>, in which he highlighted the significance of ecology (and the economy) for the survival of mankind and expressly stated: "I wish to address every person living on this planet"<sup>2</sup>. The vision of an economy linked to ecology and social justice is at the very heart of the Encyclical Letter *Laudato si'*. The pope from Argentina

<sup>1</sup> Francis (Pope), Encyclical Letter *Laudato si'* (2015-06-18). Abbreviated below to LS.

<sup>2</sup> LS 3.

had previously expressed sharp criticism in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* of an “economy that kills” and condemned the excesses of a neoliberal economy which pose a threat to human life.<sup>3</sup> Having couched his opposition to exploitative economic structures in prophetic language in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*<sup>4</sup>, the head of the Catholic Church went on in his Encyclical Letter *Laudato si'* to focus on the concept of sustainability. In this encyclical the pope reflects on a responsible approach to creation as well as on the development of a just world economic order in which all the inhabitants of planet earth as their common *oikos* enjoy a fair share of global goods, such as the atmosphere and the water, and of regional goods, such as mineral resources, forests, etc. His vision is one of intra- and inter-generational social justice and ecological responsibility. Ultimately, everything revolves around the crucial question for mankind of how ecology and the economy can be reconciled in a way that enables the human race to coexist and survive both now and in the future.

In his ecological encyclical of 2015 Pope Francis advocated an inter-faith and inter-cultural dialogue on creation, saying: “The majority of people living on our planet profess to be believers. This should spur religions to dialogue among themselves for the sake of protecting nature, defending the poor and building networks of respect and fraternity.”<sup>5</sup> There are many different facets to the dialogue Pope Francis proposed. On the one hand, there is a need to engage with different, culturally influenced concepts of creation and initiate a discussion of them and, on the other hand, to pay close attention to the social and ecological challenges the world now faces.

The International Catholic Mission Society *missio* is committed to an inter-faith and inter-cultural dialogue and it inaugurated a series of continental meetings in Latin America, Asia and Africa in order to facilitate discussion between representatives of the different religious traditions. The conferences

<sup>3</sup> Cf. K. Krämer, K. Vellguth (eds.), *Evangelii Gaudium. Voices of the Universal Church* (One World Theology, vol. 7), Freiburg 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. K. Vellguth, *And Apple Trees Still Have To Be Planted. Journeying Together Down the Road to Ecological, Social and Economic Responsibility*, in: K. Krämer, K. Vellguth (eds.), *Creation. Living Together in Our Common House* (One World Theology, vol. 11), Freiburg 2017, p. 221-236.

<sup>5</sup> LS 201.

were held consecutively in Salta (Argentina) for Latin America in 2017<sup>6</sup>, in Bangalore (India) for Asia in 2019<sup>7</sup> and in Gaborone (Botswana) for Africa in 2020<sup>8</sup>. The purpose of these three continental meetings was to promote awareness, exploration and theological reflection of different spiritualities of creation in the various religions around the world. Questions of the spirituality and theology of creation in different religions in Latin America, Asia and Africa were addressed at these conferences from an inter-faith perspective. The series of continental meetings on the theology and spirituality of creation instigated by *missio* represents a response to the exhortation issued by Pope Francis to commence an inter-faith and inter-cultural dialogue on creation. It also takes up the appeal formulated in the Earth Charter: “We stand at a critical moment in Earth’s history, a time when humanity must choose its future. [...] The choice is ours: form a global partnership to care for Earth and one another or risk the destruction of ourselves and the diversity of life.”<sup>9</sup> In this contribution I will focus on the second conference in Asia.

The inter-faith commitment to creation proposed in *Laudato si’* is one of the Latin American pope’s main concerns. Just a few days before the Asian continental conference in Bangalore, Pope Francis and Grand Imam Ahmad Mohammad Al-Tayyeb used language similar to that in the apostolic exhortation on the occasion of their meeting in Abu Dhabi. The “Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together” which they signed underlines the responsibility for creation: “Through faith in God, who has created the universe, creatures and all human beings (equal on account of his mercy), believers are called to express this human fraternity by safeguarding creation and the entire universe and supporting all persons, especially the poorest and those most in need.”<sup>10</sup>

<sup>6</sup> The conference “We Are But Guests on Earth – In Memory of Berta Cáceres (1971-2016) – Latin American Spiritualities of Creation in Dialogue” was held from 3 to 5 January 2017 in Salta (Argentina).

<sup>7</sup> The conference “Finding a Home in Creation – Asian Spiritualities of Creation in Dialogue” was held from 19 to 21 February 2019 in Bangalore (India).

<sup>8</sup> The conference “Breathing Life with Creation – African Spiritualities of Creation in Dialogue” was held from 7 to 9 January 2020 in Gaborone (Botswana).

<sup>9</sup> *Earth Charter*, in: <https://charterforcompassion.org/350-org/earth-charter> (2017.03.28)

<sup>10</sup> *A document of Human Fraternity for world peace and living together*, in: [http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/travels/2019/outside/documents/papa-francesco\\_20190204\\_documento-fratellanza-umana.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/travels/2019/outside/documents/papa-francesco_20190204_documento-fratellanza-umana.html) (2020.04.14).

The second continental meeting on the spirituality and theology of creation focused on Asia and was divided up into four sections. The participants began by examining the creation myths to be found in the various religious traditions. They explored the understanding of creation in these traditions in order to ascertain the common ground and differences between them. In the second section the emphasis was on the spirituality of creation in the major religions in Asia: Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, the indigenous religions and Christianity. The participants then considered the issue of how, from the point of view of the main religions in Asia, responsibility can be assumed for creation in a way that meets modern-day requirements. How are we to live together in creation and how do we wish to do so? This question triggered a discussion of the ethical consequences arising from religion, anthropology and ethnology. Finally, the theologians considered the significance of *Laudato si'* from an Asian perspective.

The purpose of this dialogue was to enable the participants to learn, first of all, about the various religious traditions, their understanding of reality and patterns of behaviour, then to examine perspectives on the spirituality of creation and finally to discuss the justice of creation – all with a view to promoting a dialogue between the members of the different religions on fundamental issues facing mankind and on “care for our common home”.

## Asian continental conference

The Asian continental conference, which formed part of the intercontinental project on the theology and spirituality of creation, took place at the Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram in Bangalore (India) in February 2019. The exchanges between the participants were of a comprehensive nature that went beyond theological reflection to incorporate aspects of a dialogue of life, common action and spiritual experience.<sup>11</sup> It is perhaps no accident that a continental meeting in Asia, in particular, should have been so clearly focused on dialogue. The Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the Congregation for

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, *Instruction Dialogue and Proclamation: Reflections and Orientations*, 19 May 1991, no. 42, in: [http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/audiences/1999/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_aud\\_19051999.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/audiences/1999/documents/hf_jp-ii_aud_19051999.html) (2020-11-18).

the Evangelisation of Peoples highlighted the various dimensions of dialogue in their document on “Dialogue and Proclamation”, while at its First General Assembly in Taipei in 1974 the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC) identified the “triple dialogue” – a dialogue with cultures, religions and the poor – as a specific feature of Asian theology. It was with this in mind that Clarence Devadass and other Asian theologians attending the conference in Bangalore said that the only way to meet the ecological challenge is by means of a dialogue which brings cultures and religions together.

### Creation myths in dialogue

In the first section of the conference in Bangalore the speakers explored creation myths in the various religious traditions in order to establish both common ground and differences in the understanding of creation. They deemed otherness to be of especial value for interreligious dialogue in that differences were not perceived as being divisive but rather as a source of mutual inspiration and enrichment in the development of individual identity. “This blossoms in dialogue with the unfamiliar, in the common search for truth and in shared responsibility for shaping the world and the preservation of creation.”<sup>12</sup> In the opening presentation Chandrasekar Venkatamaran began by looking at the Hindu tradition of creation. Starting with the Vedas, he said that Purusha or Shakti constitute the foundations of the universe. Purusha can be considered in three ways: as a potential presence in the non-revealed, as the revealed or as a combination of both. In Hinduism the supreme manifests itself as the universe and is both infinite consciousness and infinite strength. This Hindu view of creation puts greater emphasis on the spiritual rather than the material dimension of reality. Essential to an understanding of Hinduism is that the revelation manifest in creation is considered to be a reality which has always existed. Consequently, creation is not seen as something fundamentally new but as the revelation of the real.

<sup>12</sup> H. Schalück, *Missionarische Spiritualität und globale Welt. Mission im Zeichen von Interkulturalität, Pluralismus und Dialog*, in: T. Arnold, M. Meyer, (eds.), *Seht, da ist der Mensch. Und Gott? Herausforderungen missionarischer Spiritualität*, Ostfildern 2019, p. 154.

The next contribution dealt with Buddhist creation myths and the problem of evil. The speaker made it clear that Buddhism counters the belief in divine creation with the concept of karmic creation and portrays a world which consists of a realm of hell, a realm of spirits, a realm of animals, a realm of humans and a realm of heaven and owes its existence to the karmic energies of beings from a prior world.

Omneya Ayad then examined the creation myth in the Sufi tradition of Islam. She described the beginning of creation as an act of love. This has to do with the fact that in the course of their lives human beings must “follow the path of love” in order to find their way back to God: “To have one’s heart filled with divine love teaches us the value of sympathy and empathy towards our fellow human beings who as revelations are reflections of the divine attributes. Only then is the beginning of the story of creation bound up with its end in a never-ending cycle of divine love.”

Saji Mathew Kanayankal talked about the significance of the biblical stories of creation for the present-day ecological movement and showed that the biblical texts on creation have the narrative and dramatic form of ancient myths and should not be considered as historical records. They are supra-historical or meta-historical narratives which throw light on the notion the Israelites had of God, creation and mankind. Kanayankal pointed out that the biblical stories of creation are ultimately statements on the relationship between God, man and the cosmos, in which the created universe and all forms of being do not derive their value from their usefulness or some externally attributed worth. On the contrary, they have an intrinsic value and are consequently not a resource to be exploited for the benefit of mankind. Even though man is accorded a unique place in the universe, he is not allowed to exploit nature. Christian traditions of creation and their concept of God, man, creation and the cosmos are an invitation “to develop an ethos of ecological responsibility and to celebrate an association with, and participation in, the ecological community in the broader sense, within which it is possible to acquire a sense of responsibility for the sacredness of creation and generate respect for the value of every form of being.”

The final presentation in this section by Hector D’Souza SJ entitled “Creation Stories of Indigenous Peoples – A North-East Indian Perspective” dealt with the creation myths encountered among the 240 tribal cultures in North-East India. He noted that the indigenous communities live in close touch with nature and in harmony with creation and express in their myths a world view or philosophy of life which – like science and proverbs – provide

meaningful answers in the form of stories. These myths harbour a truth whose validity extends beyond the literal meaning of the word. D'Souza was careful to make distinctions, however, and, mindful of the current conflicts in Indian society, drew attention to the ambivalence of myths: "We need myths in order to pray, establish relationships and survive. But we also use them to sow division and promote intolerance in respect of belief, confession, skin colour and caste."

### *Spiritualities of creation in dialogue*

The contributions in the second section of the conference addressed the spiritualities of creation in the various religious traditions. In her presentation on the "Spirituality of Creation in Hinduism" Nanditha Krishna began by explaining that in Hinduism the Vedas, the Upanishads and epic and Puranic literature have different conceptions and descriptions of the creator and creation, although they share the fundamental conviction that God and creation are identical. "Nature is seen as being rooted in the transcendental creator, and the various types of natural phenomena that exist are regarded as the multiple reflections of divine properties." This gives rise to the notion that forms of existence in the world are "outflows" of the transcendental unity of God, from which they originate and to which they will return. In Hinduism, the close connection between creation and creator is accompanied by esteem for the natural world and an awareness of the significance of the environment as well as the need for careful management of natural resources. Ultimately, nature is a revelation of the divine, which is stated for example in the Bhagavad Gita when Krishna says: "I am the earth, I am the water, I am the air." In Hinduism, therefore, the identification of creation with the creator entails the obligation to treat all of creation and especially all living things with care and respect.

Considering the spirituality of creation in Buddhism, Junghee Min examined the Buddhist view of the universe and creation and the response it elicits in Buddhist rituals. She looked at the specific function the Buddhist world view can fulfil and whether a new interpretation is required for a suitable approach to the ecological crisis. She classified climate change as a question of justice and ethics. This presents a special challenge to Buddhism, because the ecological crisis is caused by the prevailing mode of thinking which – in contrast to Buddhist teaching – lacks an awareness of the connection and interdependence of human beings and other species. Junghee Min consequently

saw the ecological problem as part of a spiritual and collective crisis and outlined Buddhist cosmology and perspectives on creation before going on to deal with nature protection rituals. Among those she introduced was the tree ordination ceremony, for example, which has been practised in Northern Thailand since 1975. Buddhist monks who wish to prevent deforestation wrap a saffron robe of the kind they wear themselves around the trees and take monastic vows in front of them so that people recognise the sanctity of the trees and stop felling them to make profit from the sale of the wood.

In his contribution on “The Spirituality of Creation in Islam” Faizur Rahman categorised the creation myths in Islam as metaphysical attempts to understand the world by means of parables and to justify the belief in a creator: “Creation myths are an expression of the spiritual world view of a particular religion.” Rahman outlined the importance of spirituality in Islam and presented a number of creation stories from the Koran. Here he distinguished between texts dealing with the origins of the universe and those focusing on the emergence and continuation of life on earth. He pointed to convergences between traditions related in the Koran and scientific findings on the emergence of the cosmos, classifying Islam as a religion in which the search for scientific knowledge is depicted as “a kind of holy pilgrimage or religious rite”, the purpose of which is to interpret the spirituality of creation from an Islamic perspective.

In his paper devoted to “A Christian Perspective on the Spirituality of Creation” the Malayan theologian, Clarence Devadass, explored relations between the Church Fathers and creation in order to make it clear that questions about creation have been raised by Christian theologians from the very beginning. He pointed out that *Nostra Aetate*, the Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, opens with a reflection on the common origins of all human beings, who share a common destiny. With regard to the Church Fathers he said they saw a close connection between prayer, asceticism, the world and eschatology in the context of relations with Christ. He conceded that the transition from pantheism to monotheism had been accompanied by an estrangement of indigenous cultures from their natural habitat. He was consequently at pains to stress the significance of a spirituality of creation which is dedicated to the search for a life in fullness and endeavours to act justly, love tenderly and “walk humbly with God” (Micah 6:8). This ethical maxim is rooted in the belief that creation is a divine gift from God which he keeps in existence. Devadass drew attention here to the

ethical understanding in the Old Testament that land and cattle which are at their owners' disposal should be regarded as beings with an intrinsic value and a unique purpose and that the sacred status of nature should be restored. A restitution of this kind must rest on the understanding that the fate of the cosmos is inseparably bound up with that of mankind itself.

Considering the spirituality of creation from an indigenous perspective, Goldy M. George concentrated on the culture of the Ganda people in the Eastern Central Indian states of Odisha, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Bengal, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh and Teleghana. It transpired that the spirituality of the dalits is bound up with the earth as the innermost centre of life and that their totem relations give expression to a spiritual bond. This entails assuming responsibility for establishing a relationship with animate and inanimate elements, plants, animals, birds and other species. George admitted that the Ganda people's understanding of life was "piecemeal" in philosophical terms, but he classified it as "organic, creative and communicative" and not as "inorganic, destructive and divisive". To that extent he regarded their philosophy as an alternative both to the Brahman school and modern philosophy, since their egalitarian and eco-centric approach represents a contribution to the development of a spirituality and philosophy of life.

### *Justice of creation in dialogue*

In the third section of the continental conference the speakers turned their attention to questions of creation ethics. In the first presentation Tattwarupanandaji Maharaj approached creation ethics from a Hindu standpoint. He asserted that "ethics is nothing other than God himself" and that every kind of behaviour and every lifestyle should help to reveal the fundamental principle within ourselves. The Hindu understanding of creation ethics is thus tantamount to living in accordance with cosmic law.

Rey-Sheng Her addressed creation ethics from a Buddhist perspective, his remarks being rooted in the Tzu Chi philosophy of the environment, which regards the cosmos as a large universe and the human body as a small universe, both of which must be in balance with each other in accordance with the principles of the four elements (earth, water, fire and wind). He said this view fitted into an intellectual tradition with the old Chinese saints who called for respect for nature. Rey-Sheng Her emphasised that heaven and earth are no longer

in balance and that the imbalance within the large universe is connected with an imbalance in the small universe. The imbalance in the large universe can thus be seen as the expression of a spiritual crisis: "Life must be healthy; there has to be reconciliation with the four elements. It doesn't matter whether the body of a person or all kinds of beings on earth are affected. How can we reconcile ourselves with the earth or with the body? We ought to begin with the heart." Rey-Sheng Her moved on from this philosophy to introduce the Tzu Chi Foundation which began a Buddhist recycling campaign in 1991 that eventually led to the establishment of nine thousand recycling centres in Taiwan. The 280,000 volunteers active in these recycling centres help to ensure the recycling of materials in the country. In the meantime the recycling campaign has spread to various provinces in mainland China, the Philippines, Malaysia, Haiti, Indonesia and a number of countries in South America. Rey-Sheng Her regarded these recycling centres not just as places of action that do justice to creation, but also as places of physical health and spiritual healing. He therefore referred to them as "a new kind of Buddhist temple" which serves religious functions inside, since they foster the virtues of altruism, cooperation, solidarity, humility and a simple life. In both the recycling centres and in the ecological projects Rey-Sheng Her sees concrete approaches in line with the Buddhist teaching that all forms of being relate to one another, that all feeling creatures are equal and that all living things are interdependent.

Dealing with the ethics of creation from an Islamic perspective, Tabasum Hameed asserted that the ethics of Islamic environmental thinking have their origins in the main sources of Islam – the teachings of the Koran, the Sunnah and the Hadith as well as the Sharia. He explained that the universe as God's creation has both a spiritual and a physical dimension and that people must treat relations with the non-human world as a form of peaceful coexistence. As regards Islamic environmental thinking he distinguished between an ethical compendium, which is founded in particular on the Koran and which he defines as "knowledge of creation", and the realm of practical action, which can be defined as the handling of natural resources. The environmental crisis has shown, he said, that man has forgotten his true role as God's trustee and no longer preserves nature as a secret symbol and valuable asset with which he has been entrusted. Hameed regards environmental ethics or Fiqh-al-Biah as an Islamic response. It represents an endeavour to satisfy the needs of the masses and prevent them from coming to any harm by advocating the principles

of unity, trusteeship and responsibility. The principle of unity (Tawhid) provides human beings with a view of life which asserts that everything comes from God. This, in turn, entails the obligation not to damage or destroy anything or anybody in God's creation. The principle of trusteeship (Khaliah) calls, on the one hand, for universal fraternity and social equality while, on the other hand, rejecting any absolute property rights. Ultimately, Allah owns everything and man is obliged to deal in an appropriate manner with the divine property at his disposal. The principle of responsibility (al-Akhira) calls on human beings to review their deeds and intentions in the light of their own transience and expectations of the beyond. Tabassum Hameed stressed that the environment has an intrinsic value in Islam and that man has a religious duty not to harm the environment: "As active and conscious representatives of God we must extend our friendship and kindness equally to everything, to nature and to all that it contains."

In his contribution entitled "From Environmental Justice to Ecological Justice – On the Path to an Ecological Hermeneutics" Daniel Franklin Pilario took a critical look from a Christian point of view at the concepts of environmental justice and ecological justice. Developing an outline concept of "ecological justice", he pointed out that the term broadens the discourse by extending the perspective on all created beings within the earth community, whereas the term environmental justice defines the non-human members of the earth community not from within themselves but on the basis of their relationship with mankind. Pilario was critical of the "trustee" model, which is associated with the concept of environmental justice. The theologian from Manila showed that, while this model recognises that the earth is God's gift to everyone, it separates God from the earth and thus contradicts the understanding of God's immanence. He preferred the term ecological justice, he said, because it was broader and included man's relationship with the earth community and (some) non-human forms of being. Pilario cited five principles which influence the discourse on ecological justice and are important for the interpretation of the Bible and for theological reflection: the principle of intrinsic value, the principle of inter-connectedness, the principle of voice and resistance, and the principle of mutual care. He detected these five principles – in rudimentary fashion at least – in the Encyclical Letter *Laudato si'* and urged that "these ethical and ecological principles should be anchored in our central narratives such as the Bible" in order to overcome the prevalent anthropocentric reading of the Bible and corresponding theological interpretations.

In conclusion Virginius Xaxa commented on environmental ethics from the perspective of indigenous peoples. He pointed out that the indigenous tribes make a living by hunting, gathering, fishing, farming, etc., their primary objective being to survive rather than to accumulate. Xaxa said the relationship between human beings and the environment is influenced by tribal traditions, which means that people must fulfil their obligations to the natural environment. The totemism of the indigenous peoples illustrates the intensity of these obligations and of relations between the members themselves and with nature. The importance of land for tribal cultures derives not only from the fact that people living in the present need to make a living, but also because people have received the land from their forefathers. The land thus links the present generation with past generations. The resources available to one generation must only be exploited to the extent that is necessary. Virginius Xaxa described this “restraint” inherent in the indigenous cultures as the source of harmony between the community and the environment which rests on a balance between nature and culture, a concept of equality in respect of social structures, collective management, adaptation in the course of history, a principle of consensus in decision making, a philosophy of ethical living and the participation of the community in music, dance and culture.

### *Laudato si’ as a contribution to interreligious dialogue*

In the next section the contributors examined the Encyclical Letter *Laudato si’* from an Asian point of view. In his paper entitled “*Laudato si’*. On Care for our Common Home – An Appeal for Integral Ethics and Spirituality” Shaji George Kochuthara first introduced the encyclical letter before going on to deal with its key creation theology aspects. In doing so he made it clear that the encyclical contradicts the traditional interpretation of “dominium” and urges that the relationship between mankind and creation should be defined on the basis of the biblical traditions, in which man is entrusted with cultivating, guarding, protecting, supervising and conserving the land. Kochuthara also drew attention to the problem of anthropocentrism addressed in the encyclical. It calls for this problem to be resolved so that man can live in harmony with creation. Recalling the term “integral ecology” used by Pope Francis, which takes up the dictum issued by the International Theological Commission in 2009, the Indian theologian explained that what is ultimately at stake is the

interconnectedness of everything, which makes it the root of environmental ecology, economic ecology, social ecology, cultural ecology and everyday ecology. Moreover, he said, the term “integral ecology” encompasses the principle of the common good as well as solidarity with future generations.

In his short paper on “A Matter of the Heart – *Laudato si’* in the Philippines” Daniel Franklin Pilario looked at the role of the heart, aesthetic conversion and the victims of ecological disasters as the teachers of ecological spirituality. He began his remarks by citing the Dalai Lama, thereby underlining the core inter-faith message of the social and environmental encyclical *Laudato si’*.

In the paper that followed on “*Laudato si’*. On Care for Our Common Home in Malaysia” Clarence Devadass described the current ecological crisis in Malaysia, reviewed the reception of *Laudato si’* in the country, outlined the challenge posed by an ecological turnaround and illustrated the ways in which the Church has contributed to the reception of the environmental encyclical and encouraged change. As regards the reception of the encyclical in Malaysia, he pointed out that its publication had led to a greater moral awareness among individual Christians in respect of a faith-based ecological consciousness, that a culture of change can be observed in the everyday activities of the Church and that *Laudato si’* has paved the way for greater ecumenical and inter-faith engagement.

Winding up this section, Saji Mathew Kanayankal looked at *Laudato si’* as a message of hope in the midst of the crisis, dealt with the main thoughts contained in the encyclical and illustrated how the effects of the ecological encyclical and the irresistible appeal of its message can be seen as a ray of hope in the current ecological crisis.

### *Laudato si’* as a challenge for art

In conclusion the Indian artist Jyoti Sahi, who lives in an art ashram he has founded near Bangalore, introduced the painting “The New Adam” which he had made especially for the conference. In it he depicts a dialogue between Christian biblical imagery and the iconography of the Indian subcontinent and portrays the resurrected Christ as the “new Adam” in the Garden of Eden. The resurrected Christ himself appears to be the tree of life, the roots of which reach down to the earth. Interestingly enough, it is women who symbolise the earth

on which Christ reveals himself in the flame of his resurrected presence. The motif, which arose in conjunction with the series of conferences, exemplifies the inculturation of Christianity in Asia.<sup>13</sup>

## Encounter between Franciscan and Ignatian spirituality

The conference on the spirituality and theology of creation in Bangalore was markedly Asian in that it was greatly influenced by dialogue and trust in harmony despite all contradictions. At the same time the conference had a distinctly missiological character, since mission at the outset of the third millennium – and particularly so in the Asian context – can only be conceptualised as the realisation of relations, as the experience of an enrichment attributable to the alterity of other regions and as dialogue. “The dialogue paradigm mirrors the way in which God himself approaches people. Hence the entire history of salvation can be seen as a dialogue of salvation between God and man, which begins with the Exodus and culminates in God’s salvific acts.”<sup>14</sup> The style of the Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si* is itself rooted in dialogue, being both inviting and inclusive. The pope wishes to engage in a conversation about the future of the planet which includes everyone.<sup>15</sup>

A missionary analysis of issues concerning the theology and spirituality of creation takes dialogue as its methodical point of departure and, in the age of globalisation, constitutes an invitation to engage in inter-faith and inter-cultural encounters. This method of proceeding “rests on the conviction that an encounter with the unfamiliar leads to a better understanding of one’s own beliefs and opens up new ground for all those involved”<sup>16</sup>. Dialogue is not so much the objective as the path – and it can be trod without fear of risking or even losing one’s own identity. On the contrary, the exchange between

<sup>13</sup> Cf. P. Neuner, *Die Hellenisierung des Christentums als Modell von Inkulturation*, “Stimmen der Zeit” (1995) no. 6, p. 372f.

<sup>14</sup> K. Krämer, *Mission im Dialog. Grenzen des christlichen Zeugnisses in religiösen, kulturellen und sozialen Kontexten*, “Forum Weltkirche” 136 (2017) no. 6, p. 24.

<sup>15</sup> LS 14.

<sup>16</sup> H. Schalück, *Missionarische Spiritualität und globale Welt. Mission im Zeichen von Interkulturalität, Pluralismus und Dialog*, in: T. Arnold, M. Meyer, *Seht, da ist der Mensch. Und Gott? Herausforderungen missionarischer Spiritualität*, Ostfildern 2019, p. 158.

representatives of different religions advocated by Pope Francis presents an opportunity for personal religious identity to grow and flourish. It was this blossoming of personal identity through encounters with otherness that the former Bishop of Aachen, Klaus Hemmerle, had in mind when he said: “Let me learn about you, the way you think and the way you talk, the questions you have and the person you are so that I can learn afresh the message that I have for you.”<sup>17</sup> Hemmerle saw exchanges with others and exposure to the unfamiliar as an opportunity to grow one’s own identity and, by engaging with others, to gain a better understanding of oneself. This open-mindedness towards others and their differentness can be seen as a specific feature of Franciscan-influenced missionary spirituality. Hermann Schalück, who was once Minister General of the Franciscan Order, recently described Francis of Assisi as a “pioneer of inter-cultural encounters”, whose outstanding characteristic was that he reached out to others and transcended boundaries.<sup>18</sup> “Trusting love and care instead of divisive clichés, a fundamental brotherly attitude and agreeable encounters and religious discussions arising from a familiarity with the culture of others.”<sup>19</sup> To that extent the dialogue that was called for by Pope Francis and conducted in Bangalore reveals a Franciscan missionary spirituality which seeks an exchange with others, fosters relations and thereby experiences eco-social dialogue as a locus theologicus and encounters as occasions to experience God.<sup>20</sup>

Together with traces of Franciscan missionary spirituality, the influence of the Ignatian mysticism of creation can be seen in both the Encyclical Letter *Laudato si’* and the conference in Bangalore. In the “Contemplation to Attain the Love of God” the Ignatian spiritual exercises focus on the “blessings of creation” and invite reflection on “how God dwells in creatures: in the elements giving them existence, in the plants giving them life, in the animals conferring

<sup>17</sup> K. Hemmerle, *Spielräume Gottes und der Menschen: Beiträge zu Ansatz und Feldern kirchlichen Handelns. Ausgewählt und eingeleitet von Reinhard Göllner und Bernd Trocholepczy*, Freiburg 1996, p. 329.

<sup>18</sup> H. Schalück, *Missionarische Spiritualität und globale Welt. Mission im Zeichen von Interkulturalität, Pluralismus und Dialog*, in: T. Arnold, M. Meyer, *Seht, da ist der Mensch. Und Gott? Herausforderungen missionarischer Spiritualität*, Ostfildern 2019, p. 159.

<sup>19</sup> N. Kuster, *Franziskus. Rebell und Heiliger*, Freiburg 2009, p. 184.

<sup>20</sup> M. Vogt, *Der ökosoziale Dialog als locus theologicus*, “Lebendige Seelsorge” 70 (2019) no. 1, p. 16-20.

upon them sensation, in man bestowing understanding”<sup>21</sup>. This perspective certainly correlates with the understanding of creation in Asian religions in that they regard creation, in particular, as a place of divine revelation and therefore attribute to nature a value which transcends their relations with other people and their “usefulness” for individual livelihood. Drawing attention to the character of Ignatian creation mysticism in *Laudato si'*, Martin Maier says: “This view runs through the whole of *Laudato si'*. Nature as a whole not only manifests God but is also a locus of his presence (LS 85, 87, 88). God is intimately present to each being, without impinging on the autonomy of his creature (LS 80). [...] God is present in the smallest and the greatest. If God is present in all things, then everything is interconnected.”

During the Asian continental conference on the theology and spirituality of creation in Bangalore the openness and richness of Franciscan spirituality merged with that of Ignatian spirituality. This gave rise to a missionary space in which the myths, spiritualities and theologies of creation in the different religious traditions in Asia encountered and occasionally touched each other. And, as we know, wherever there is close contact something new comes into being.

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<sup>21</sup> Ex. 235

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# Christianity as a Universal Resource among Others?

## Creation Faith in an Intercultural and Interreligious Perspective

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This paper is based on the series of conferences on the spirituality of creation conducted by the Pontifical Mission Society *missio* in Aachen described in the previous contribution.<sup>1</sup> The aim of the project was to study creation faith, its theological foundations, and its eco-ethical impact from a global intercultural and interreligious perspective.<sup>2</sup> Besides the main theological subject of the conferences, i. e. creation theology, another topic featured prominently in the discourse, namely that of religious and cultural identity. Apparently, among the aspects of a religious worldview, it is above all the creation faith which is grounded in a specific natural and cultural context and which shapes the identity of a community with respect to its environment. Motivated by these

<sup>1</sup> K. Vellguth, *Creation Spiritualities in Dialogue*, see above in this volume.

<sup>2</sup> This comparative approach included the perspectives of theologians and environmentalists from different religious traditions and cultures from different nations across three continents: South America, Asia, and Africa.

observations, I have attempted to research the interdependence between creation faith and identity. Some of the results will be presented in this paper.<sup>3</sup>

## Christianity's Universal Truth Claim and the Importance of the Particular

My basic assumption is that any form of creation spirituality and ethos must originate in a specific setting, either because it is autochthonic or has been successfully inculturated, to be vital and ecologically effective. Christianity, however, has a universal claim in respect to creation faith, which is globally inclusive. Even if this claim is interpreted, quite generally, as the belief that each being deserves to be treated as God's creature and in accordance with Christian values, it still asserts a singular truth. Besides, it remains abstract, unless it is grounded in a particular ecological context. This tension between Christianity's universal truth claim and the obvious need for an ecological spirituality and ethos to be rooted in a particular context, constitutes the creation-specific shape of the general missiological dilemma between the universality and the particularity of faith.<sup>4</sup> In fact, both are needed. While the contextualisation of creation faith is essential, its universal dimension must not be neglected. To meet both requirements, Christian key beliefs about creation (as well as those of any other religion) need to be transferred into particular settings to generate ecologically effective creation spiritualities. This does not only apply to geographical and socioeconomic contexts, but, as is currently becoming apparent, also to ecological ones. Thus, to meet the challenges of an ever-changing environment, ecologically relevant principles and values need to be translated and adapted.

The encyclical *Laudato si'* reveals Pope Francis's awareness of the relevance of both aspects: the universal as well as the particular. In order to protect the earth, a cooperation in ecological matters on a global scale is necessary (LS 3)

<sup>3</sup> I. Ibrahim, *Identität und Schöpfungsglaube. Interkulturelle und interreligiöse Perspektiven zur Schöpfungstheologie* (to be published soon).

<sup>4</sup> V. Küster, *Kontextualität und Universalität des Evangeliums. Ökumenische Perspektiven*, in: M. Luber (ed.), *Kontextualität des Evangeliums. Weltkirchliche Herausforderungen der Missionstheologie*, Regensburg 2012, p. 87.

as well as a sound foundation of religious faith in a specific environment. On the one hand, Pope Francis emphasises the importance of a primary connection to a certain place for the development of a person's spirit and identity, saying:

The history of our friendship with God is always linked to particular places which take on an intensely personal meaning [...] Anyone who has grown up in the hills or used to sit by the spring to drink or played outdoors in the neighbourhood square; going back to these places is a chance to recover something of their true selves. (LS 84)

Daniel Franklin Pilario considers this paragraph the “heart of the encyclical”.<sup>5</sup> Regarding the universal aspect, on the other hand, Pope Francis defines a new role for Christianity in a globalised world, which acknowledges its pluralistic nature as well as the urgency of an “ecological conversion” (LS 217). Having established that in ecological matters it befits the church to listen to experts (LS 61), he calls on Christians to share the spiritual and ethical resources of their faith with the rest of humankind for the sake of the common good as *one resource among others*:

Given the complexity of the ecological crisis and its multiple causes, we need to realize that the solutions will not emerge from just one way of interpreting and transforming reality. [...] If we are truly concerned to develop an ecology capable of remedying the damage we have done, no branch of the sciences and no form of wisdom can be left out, and that includes religion and the language particular to it. (LS 63)

According to Christoph Theobald, this indicates a decisive new missiological course, as the encyclical introduces the Christian faith not from the perspective of its truth claim, but – more modestly – regarding its usefulness as an

<sup>5</sup> D. Pilario, *Herzenssache*. Laudato si' *auf den Philippinen*, in: I. Ibrahim, S. Kochuthara, K. Vellguth (eds.), *In der Schöpfung Heimat finden. Asiatische Schöpfungspiritualitäten im Dialog*, Ostfildern 2020, p. 283.

ecological resource among others in times of crisis.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, Theobald suggests that Christianity should follow the example of its founder and provide its resources “for free”, i. e. without targeting new exclusive commitments among non-Christians.<sup>7</sup>

Therefore, the crucial question is: Can the universal claim of Christianity be reconstructed in such a way that its creation faith is conceived of as a spiritual resource among others, and can this be done without diminishing its universal dimension? From an ecological perspective, this appears to be not only necessary, but also possible. In the following paragraphs I will describe some observations which support this assumption. Doing so, I will give examples of effective integration of ecologically valuable Christian principles in various contexts. Furthermore, I will outline options for a synergetic cooperation of different religious traditions in respect to ecological issues and put forward some suggestions as to the role which Christianity could play therein.

## Examples of an Effective Integration of Christian Principles from Three Continents

In Latin America a successful integration of Christian creation faith with indigenous worldviews can be observed. One example is the concept of a cosmic interdependence and interrelatedness of all creatures. In the worldview of indigenous peoples of the Andes this view is rooted in the belief that all beings are alive and connected in a supplementary reciprocity through Pacha, the all-pervasive spirit of the Andes.<sup>8</sup> From a Christian perspective this ties in with the Franciscan model of a universal brother- and sisterhood of all creatures and brings to mind the fact that humans are also part of this web of life. In resonance with the cultural and natural context of Latin America, Christian

<sup>6</sup> C. Theobald, *Christentum als Stil. Für ein zeitgemäßes Glaubensverständnis in Europa*, Freiburg i. Br. 2018, p. 209.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. 100f.

<sup>8</sup> V. Bascopé, *In Pacha sein und leben, um aktuellen Herausforderungen mit einer Ethik der andinen Völker zu begegnen*, in: E. Steffens, C. Pagano, K. Vellguth (eds.), *Wir sind nur Gast auf Erden. Lateinamerikanische Schöpfungsspiritualitäten im Dialog*, Ostfildern 2019, p. 76f.

theologians have developed an anthropology which can be summarized in the symbolic phrase: “We are earth.”<sup>9</sup> It reflects the awareness of the cosmic unity as well as the belief that the divine can be encountered in nature, including human beings. This view is supported by Afro-Latin-American cultures, which often consist of hybrid mixtures of Christian, (West) African and indigenous elements.<sup>10</sup> They emphasise the importance of the human body as a spiritual place, as it forms the intersection of the transcendent realm with human and non-human nature, which is expressed in various cults and rituals. Pope Francis, who is a native of the Latin American continent, shares this worldview as becomes obvious when he states that through our bodies “God has joined us so closely to the world around us that we can feel the desertification of the soil almost as a physical ailment, and the extinction of a species as a painful disfigurement.” (EG 215) From a missiological viewpoint the evidence from Latin America shows that inculturation – notwithstanding the hegemonial structure inherent in (post-)colonial contexts – is a process of mutual exchange, in which two or more belief systems impact each other.

In the context of (Sub-Saharan) Africa, complex synergies between worldviews can be found. These can either work implicitly or be initiated through conscious efforts. A key concept in Bantu ontology is that of the *life force*,<sup>11</sup> which manifests itself in all beings, animate and inanimate – in fact, many African Traditional Religions do not distinguish between beings according to these two categories at all. In contrast to the Western worldview, this life force is only realized in a community of beings, the *vital union*, a concept that has become generally known as *ubuntu*. In fact, Desmond Tutu calls the principle of *ubuntu* “part of the gift that Africa will give the world.”<sup>12</sup> It implies that the life force of a being can be increased or diminished depending on

<sup>9</sup> L. Cerviño, *Bemerkungen zu einer ganzheitlichen ökologischen Umkehr im Sinne einer Ökotheologie. Über die christliche Auffassung von der Schöpfung der Welt und des Menschen*, in: E. Steffens, C. Pagano, K. Vellguth (eds.), op. cit., p. 137.

<sup>10</sup> M. Campelo, *Àdanidá. Mensch, Umwelt und Orixá*, in: E. Steffens, C. Pagano, K. Vellguth (eds.), op. cit., p. 81-88.

<sup>11</sup> First described in: P. Tempels, *Bantu-Philosophie. Ontologie und Ethik*, Heidelberg 1956.

<sup>12</sup> M. Mulemfo, *Thabo Mbeki and the African Renaissance. The Emergence of a New African Leadership*, Pretoria 2001, p. 58.

the presence of the life force in the community.<sup>13</sup> Various African languages express this in sayings like: “A person is a person through other persons,” or: “I am, because we are.”<sup>14</sup> The idea of the vital union includes non-human beings as well as humans.<sup>15</sup> Christian theologians like Aidan Msafiri seek to integrate the traditional wisdom into an ecotheology which is able to “carry the living building of African spirituality.”<sup>16</sup> Msafiri’s so-called “Holistic African Credible Ecological Model”<sup>17</sup> combines classic Catholic norms and values with African traditional concepts like that of a vital union. Neo-Pentecostal movements take this integrative approach a step further. They merge aspects of Christianity with indigenous beliefs into new religious conceptions, which claim to be designed to rid Christianity of its European heritage and make it more authentically African.<sup>18</sup> Through the ongoing effort to root Christianity in the African soil, Christianity has become an influential presence on this continent, as the following occurrence illustrates: At the conference on African creation spirituality the representative of African Traditional Religions, Sinikiwe Dube, delivered a paper on creation ethics by the title: “Am I My Brother’s Keeper?”<sup>19</sup> When asked why she had chosen this title, she replied

<sup>13</sup> S. Dube, G. Mafere, U. Chitauro, “*Bin ich denn der Hüter meines Bruders?*” *Eine Analyse des Wissens, der Praxis und der Grundhaltungen städtischer Gemüsebauern im Kontext traditioneller afrikanischer Religion(en) und Schöpfungsethik*, in: M. Awinongya, G. Faimau, K. Vellguth (eds.), *Mit der Schöpfung Leben atmen. Afrikanische Schöpfungspiritualitäten im Dialog*, Ostfildern 2021, p. 55-70.

<sup>14</sup> J. Mbiti, *African Religion and Philosophy*, Oxford 1969, p. 108f.

<sup>15</sup> S. Dube, G. Mafere, U. Chitauro, op. cit., p. 7.

<sup>16</sup> A. Msafiri, *Eine afrikanische Spiritualität der Schöpfung. Ein wertorientiertes Paradigma und bewährte Vorgehensweisen in Tansania*, in: K. Krämer, K. Vellguth (eds.), *Schöpfung. Miteinander leben im gemeinsamen Haus*, Freiburg i. Br. 2017, p. 316.

<sup>17</sup> A. Msafiri, *Auf dem Weg zu einer transformativen und glaubwürdigen Ökotheologie für Afrika. Eine katholische Perspektive*, in: M. Awinongya, G. Faimau, K. Vellguth (eds.), op. cit., p. 229-232.

<sup>18</sup> The example of the Ngabwe Covenant, in which a Christian minister assumes the role of a Traditional Leader and proclaims himself as King Ngabwe VI., illustrates; cf.: C. Kaunda, “*Ich gieße Jesu Blut über dieses Land.*” *Der ‚Ngabwe-Bund‘ und die Erfolgsaussichten für öko-pneumatisch-kulturelle Vorstellungen in Sambia*, in: M. Awinongya, G. Faimau, K. Vellguth (eds.), op. cit., p. 177-194.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. n. 214.

that given the great variety of indigenous religions, Christianity served as an “umbrella religion”. The choice of this term is remarkable, as it signifies protection as well as unity. Referring to the question whether Christianity can conceive of itself as one resource among others, living up to the protective and unifying role ascribed to it here, might be an option.

To bring in an example from Asia, Pilario’s distinction between environmental justice and ecological justice (*ecojustice*)<sup>20</sup> is worth mentioning. The latter, which Pilario advocates, is the more inclusive term, as it aims to protect the rights of all creatures. Based on the assumption that non-human creatures have an intrinsic value, purpose and even a voice, the role of humans as custodians, who are akin with all other creatures, is favoured over that of humans as God’s stewards.<sup>21</sup> Pilario develops his approach against the background of Payatas, the huge garbage dumpsite of Manila. In this setting, which Pilario calls a “paradigmatic location”<sup>22</sup>, the insoluble link of the fate of human and non-human creatures as well as that of the exceedingly rich and the desperately poor becomes visible: Working with the vast amounts of garbage produced by the rich not only affects the health of the garbage people, what is more, the garbage seepage contaminates the source of the main potable water supply of the region. As a result, the whole ecosystem is affected.<sup>23</sup>

The call for an inclusive ecojustice also has its advocates among theologians in Latin America, where ecotheology is understood as an extension of the theology of liberation,<sup>24</sup> and in Africa, as for instance the ecofeminist approach of Musa Dube shows. Under the influence of Setswana creation mythology, according to which the earth brings forth all creatures, Dube sees all members of the earth community as God’s incarnated Word, which cooperate with God in the creation of humankind and have rights of their own.<sup>25</sup> It can be concluded that the quest for ecojustice originates in specific contexts,

<sup>20</sup> D. Pilario, *Von Umweltgerechtigkeit zu ökologischer Gerechtigkeit. Auf dem Weg zu einer ökologischen Hermeneutik*, in: I. Ibrahim, S. Kochuthara, K. Vellguth (eds.), op. cit., p. 241-259.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 252-254.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 240.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 244.

<sup>24</sup> L. Cerviño, op. cit., p. 135.

<sup>25</sup> M. Dube, “*And God Saw That It Was Very Good.*” *An Earth-friendly Theatrical Reading of Genesis 1*, “Black Theology” 13 (2015) no. 3, p. 230-246.

from which, subsequently, global networks of theologians across various continents and denominations emerge.<sup>26</sup> This tendency of contextual theologies to transcend the particular contexts in which they originate and to form new universal communities, can be observed in feminist, liberation and ecologically oriented theologies.<sup>27</sup>

## Perspectives for a Synergetic Cooperation of the Religions of the World

As the observations mentioned above illustrate, Christian creation faith has the power to integrate various cultural and religious traditions and to bring forth new hybrid collective identities. However, the alterity of the religious 'other' must also be acknowledged and respected. In this regard, Joseph Ratzinger's statement that "outside of modern technical civilization there is no such thing as religion-free culture,"<sup>28</sup> serves as a reminder. Therefore, the options for a synergetic cooperation of different religions in matters of creation theology and ecological ethics have been dealt with separately and will be briefly presented in the following paragraphs.<sup>29</sup>

Two main areas in which a cooperation seems possible have already been sketched above. First of all, the concept of a cosmic interrelatedness and

<sup>26</sup> Among these are, apart from the above-mentioned: Leonardo Boff, Sallie McFague, Steven Bouma-Prediger, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Jürgen Moltmann, and Norman Habel.

<sup>27</sup> V. Küster, op. cit., p. 96f.

<sup>28</sup> J. Ratzinger, *Der christliche Glaube vor der Herausforderung der Kulturen*, in: P. Gordan (ed.), *Evangelium und Inkulturation (1492-1992)*, Salzburg 1995, p. 15.

<sup>29</sup> European missiologists and religious scholars disagree whether Intercultural Theology includes interreligious approaches (Henning Wrogemann, Volker Küster und Klaus Hock), or whether Interreligious Theology is the main category into which all other subcategories should finally coalesce (Schmidt-Leukel). In considering the interreligious and the intercultural aspect separately, in the knowledge that they are bound together through the hybridity inherent in all religious and cultural identities, this paper follows the line that Franz Gmainer-Pranzl, Judith Gruber and Sigrid Rettenbacher take. Rettenbacher states that "Intercultural Theology is a purely inner-Christian affair;" cf.: S. Rettenbacher, *Interreligiöse Theologie – postkolonial gelesen*, in: R. Bernhardt, P. Schmidt-Leukel (eds.), *Interreligiöse Theologie. Chancen und Probleme*, Zürich 2013, p. 78.

mutual interdependence of beings, which prevails among indigenous cultures across all three continents. This pervasive concept includes all life forms, and it also unites the natural world with the spiritual dimension, and the past with the present as well as with the future. This becomes obvious in the vivid connection with the ancestors, which play an important role among all the indigenous religions that were represented at the conferences. In Hinduism and Buddhism, a holistic worldview, which transcends all dualities, is supported by the belief in reincarnation which connects all sentient beings, as it means that any creature could be a person's late relative. Gautama Buddha is said to have reached enlightenment the very moment he gained insight into the cosmic unity and interconnectedness, and in Hinduism the Superior Being, Brahman, is the unifying force in creation. As regards the Abrahamic religions, this concept is rooted in the conviction that God is the origin of all life and thus all creatures are related through this common life source.

Secondly, the concept of ecological justice has been mentioned. It is part of a larger complex of values and principles, which include responsibility for the earth, and intergenerational as well as intragenerational justice. These concepts are key beliefs in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The parable of the man who plants a tree whose fruits will not grow in his lifetime and which he will not be able to enjoy (Babylonian Talmud, Ta'anit 23a) illustrates the principle of intergenerational care and justice, which has become influential in secular contexts. All Abrahamic religions see the responsibility to protect the earth as a responsibility before God. Islam particularly emphasises this view, insofar as the term *Khalifah* (= steward) implies a status which requires certain qualities like knowledge, skills, and obedience to God. So, although all humans have the potential to obtain this position, they have to prove worthy of it by meeting such requirements.<sup>30</sup> If seen in its ecological dimension, as a few Muslim scholars suggest,<sup>31</sup> this concept means that stewardship is earned through an effort to protect all creatures. In addition to this, like in Christianity, the

<sup>30</sup> Y. Dadoo, *Gottes Sachwalter in islamischer Theologie*, in: M. Awinongya, G. Faimau, K. Vellguth (eds.), op. cit., p. 73-96.

<sup>31</sup> It has to be noted that there are various interpretations of the concept of *Khalifah*, including a mystic one (as in Sufism) and also a rather problematic political one (as in the concept of the caliphate in current fundamentalist branches of Islam). Among the scholars who focus its ecotheological dimension Dadoo mentions Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Mohammad Hashim Kamali; cf. *ibid.*

belief in a Last Judgement seeks to ensure moral well-behaviour. In Hinduism and Buddhism, the law of Karma plays a comparable ethical role, as it holds humans responsible for the consequences of (wittingly performed) actions, even if they cannot be immediately noticed, as is often the case with environmental pollution and destruction.<sup>32</sup>

A further set of beliefs and viewpoints that religions in general share, is the perception of the intrinsic value of all beings. According to various traditions, one way in which the intrinsic value of God's creatures manifests itself is their beauty. Reformed Christianity, following Calvin's view of creation as a "theatre of God's glory", asks of humans to revere and respect its beauty as it reveals God's wisdom.<sup>33</sup> Particularly in Islamic cultures, beauty is a highly acclaimed value. The beauty of the creatures reflects God's greatness, and through their beauty they praise him. This awareness forms the core of Islamic creation spirituality. Seyyed Hossein Nasr claims that destroying a species entails stopping a whole class from worshipping God.<sup>34</sup> The importance of acknowledging the beauty of non-human creatures lies in the fact that this protects their worth independently from their usefulness to humankind. In *Laudato si'* Pope Francis expresses the need of this attitude in order to bring about deep change in ecological matters:

By learning to see and appreciate beauty, we learn to reject self-interested pragmatism. If someone has not learned to stop and admire something beautiful, we should not be surprised if he or she treats everything as an object to be used and abused without scruple. (LS 215)

Referring to this, Pilario suggests that a "conversion to beauty" is called for to heal the earth community.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>32</sup> O. Dwivedi, *Dharmic Ecology*, in: C.K. Chapple, M.E. Tucker (eds.), *Hinduism and Ecology. The Intersection of Earth, Sky, and Water*, Cambridge, MA 2000, p. 14.

<sup>33</sup> H. Knoetze, *Reformierte Theologie im Dialog mit der Schöpfungspiritualität im Kontext des religiösen Pluralismus in Afrika*, in: M. Awinongya, G. Faimau, K. Vellguth (eds.), op. cit., p. 159-175.

<sup>34</sup> S. Nasr, *Introduction in Islamic Cosmological Doctrines*, New York, 1993, p. 96.

<sup>35</sup> D. Pilario, *Herzenssache*, op. cit., p. 284.

Last but not least, a virtue that all religions advocate in one way or the other, is that of self-restraint. It features dominantly in the indigenous religions, as various taboos indicate. Taboos come in the form of food restrictions or the prohibition to utilize certain plants or areas. In some cultures, as e. g. in the rainforest of central India, those taboos are connected with the totem system. This means that each totem clan has to observe specific food rules and prohibitions concerning general usage of natural resources. By this measure the extinction of species is prevented.<sup>36</sup> Another example is the Kipsigis culture in Kenya, where certain areas are strictly reserved for ritual purposes (e. g. the seclusion of initiates) and not available to the community for everyday usage. This, in connection with the totem system, is an effective means to preserve biodiversity.<sup>37</sup> The aim which those communities pursue is that of self-preservation, in contrast to the accumulation of goods. In this regard, people in the industrialised parts of the world can learn from the indigenous cultures. Of course, this does not mean to say that totem systems should be globally installed, but rather that the spiritual resources in all traditions that help to benefit the natural environment by limiting human exploitation should be reactivated. Various ascetic traditions indicate that religiously motivated self-restraint has its place in the religions of the far East, Christianity and probably all other religions. In the Qur'an, for instance, it says that Allah "does not like the wasteful." (7:31) In 1990 Pope John Paul II called on Christians to practise "[s]implicity, moderation and discipline, as well as a spirit of sacrifice" [...], lest all suffer the negative consequences of the careless habits of a few,"<sup>38</sup> and has, therewith laid the foundations for the "ecological conversion" (LS 217) which Pope Francis advocates.

<sup>36</sup> V. Xaxa, *Umweltethik aus der Perspektive indigener Völker*, in: I. Ibrahim, S. Kochuthara, K. Vellguth (eds.), op. cit., p. 65-79.

<sup>37</sup> N. Rop, *Die traditionelle kosmozentrische Weltanschauung und Schöpfungsspiritualität der Kipsigis und ihre Bedeutung für die Erhaltung der Umwelt*, in: M. Awinongya, G. Faimau, K. Vellguth (eds.), op. cit., p. 31-48.

<sup>38</sup> John Paul II., *For the Celebration of the World Day of Peace, 1 January 1990*, 13, [http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/peace/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_mes\\_19891208\\_xxiii-world-day-for-peace.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_19891208_xxiii-world-day-for-peace.html) (2020.11.07)

## A New Role for Christianity

From the eco-ethical concepts presented above, it would seem that religions are able to give their contribution in the protection of the earth. What about the specific part of Christianity in this, though? Referring to the suggestion I have initially put forward, namely, to view the Christian creation faith as one resource among others, the following role for Christianity in a pluralistic and global context can be envisioned:

If Christianity were to provide its resources “for free”, in keeping with Jesus’ inclusive hospitality, as Theobald suggests, i. e. without expecting formal conversion, the indigenous peoples should be the first to benefit. Christianity could help to make heard the “silenced voices”<sup>39</sup> of those who lack representation in religious, political and cultural discourses. In this way they might even be enabled to give a valuable contribution in ecological matters. As has been shown, traditional cultures are often eco-sensitive and have spiritual resources, which have not yet been effectively translated into the changing ecological contexts. A further, practical measure the Christian churches could take is to provide space and opportunities for all people (who are interested) to experience creation as a meeting place with God. The research has revealed that (eco)spirituality needs a connection to a natural environment and that a lack thereof diminishes all religiosity and eventually harms the relationship with God.<sup>40</sup> Therefore, it would be beneficial to integrate creation-experience into service or to initiate ecological projects which give people the opportunity to experience and to protect nature. This would ensure a new understanding of religious practice, even of liturgy. In this respect, the projects of the Taiwanese Tzu Chi Foundation, a large faith-based NGO, particularly their garbage recycling centres, are exemplary: People work in these institutions for the benefit of the environment, and in return they profit from the positive spiritual, social and psychological effects this work has on them. Apparently, this meaningful work has a healing effect even on people who suffer from depression, addiction or other diseases. Most remarkably, this ecologically and

<sup>39</sup> G. Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, in: G. Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak? Postkolonialität und subalterne Artikulation*, Wien 2008, p. 103.

<sup>40</sup> C. Devadass, *Schöpfungspiritualität. Eine christliche Perspektive*, in: I. Ibrahim, S. Kochuthara, K. Vellguth (eds.), op. cit., p. 225.

socially profitable work is classified as religious practice and the workplaces are considered as “new kinds of Buddhist temples”.<sup>41</sup> Finally, it can be said that projects like the one that has been conducted by *missio* Aachen, is also one such measure through which Christianity freely provides itself as one resource among others. In accordance with Pope Francis’s call, the conferences sought to involve various religious and cultural traditions in a dialogue about creation spiritualities, searching for common ground in fundamental questions, and to initiate synergetic processes which would ultimately serve to promote an eco-ethical lifestyle.

As regards the dilemma between the local and the global aspect of creation faith, the research, some results of which have been presented here, has shown that most individuals and communities feel love, care and responsibility towards the land to which they have a primary link. Ideally, they would be able to transfer these emotions and attitudes to different contexts. In this way, the metaphor of the homeland could be extended to that of the ‘earth as home’, i. e. from the particular spot on earth in which individuals take their first spiritual steps or to which a people may feel existentially bound, into the guiding image of the earth as the home of all of humankind and of all other creatures. This is an image Pope Francis offers to all people in his encyclical, when he speaks of the earth as “our common home”.

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<sup>41</sup> R. Her, *Schöpfungsethik. Buddhistische Perspektiven und die Umweltorganisation Tzu Chi von Dharma-Meisterin Cheng Yen*, in: I. Ibrahim, S. Kochuthara, K. Vellguth (eds.), op. cit., p. 156.

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