

LAUDATO SI AND THE AFRICAN ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract

Laudato si (Praise Be) is the second encyclical of Pope Francis. The encyclical has the subtitle *on care for our common home. This common home is our environment. In it, the Pope critiques consumerism and irresponsible development, laments environmental degradation and global warming, hence, calls all people of the world to take swift and unified global action.* In Africa, environmental crisis is getting worse each day due to different nefarious human activities towards nature. Using the method of critical analysis, the researchers aver that broken environment we live in shows our broken humanity. Therefore it's prerequisite to protect, value and appreciate our African environment.

Keywords: *Laudato Si*, African Environment, Ecological Crisis, Ecology, Pope Francis

Introduction

It is now six years since the release of the encyclical letter, *Laudato Si*, On Care for Our Common Home, by Pope Francis on May 25, 2015. In the Encyclical, Pope Francis calls on all people to be united by the planet that they share and be involved in creating a new dialogue about the future of the planet. The damages done by the industrial and agricultural activities are well known. These include ozone layer depletion, deforestation, unjust exploitation, etc. Africa is the most vulnerable region to the effects of climate change and this is partly because of the people's harmful actions towards nature.

An Overview of *Laudato Si*

The Papal Encyclical letter *Laudato si* by Pope Francis is the most comprehensive Vatican document to date on environmentalism, ethics, and Christian faith. The document is intended for all people, Catholics and Christians alike. It's arguments are founded on theological convictions (Francis, Pope; 2016)

Laudato si represents one of the principal challenges facing humanity in our day and warns of unprecedented destruction of ecosystems, with serious consequence for all of us if prompt climate change mitigation efforts are not undertaken. The encyclical highlights the role of fossil fuels in causing climate change. It's an urgent challenge to protect our common home to bring the whole human family together to seek a sustainable and integral development, for we know that things can change. Pope Francis' *Laudato si* is a text of such landmark significance that it may well become one of the most important sources of Catholic Social Teaching since its inception with

Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* in 1891. Both the title of the encyclical (On Care for Our Common Home) and its opening quote from St. Francis's canticle establish the focus of this text (O'Malley, Sean, 2015). After a comprehensive introduction, the encyclical divides into six chapters, each examining different aspects of the rupture between humans and creation and the prospects for healing this relationship.

The first chapter, "What is happening to our Common Home", looks at the various symptoms of environmental degradation. The impacts of climate change are considered alongside issues of the depletion of freshwater and loss of biodiversity. There is no substantial discussion of the science of global warming; instead, it simply points to the overwhelming consensus concerning the negative impact of carbon-intensive economies on the natural world and human life: Caring for ecosystems demands farsightedness, since no one looking for quick and easy profit is truly interested in their preservation.

The encyclical firmly posits that a truly ecological approach is also inherently social, an approach that simultaneously hears the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor. The social and environmental impacts of mining are cited as a prime example of this. In many places within the text, Francis lauds the achievements of the environmental movement, while at the same time, he critiques elements within it. He forthrightly dismisses the idea that population growth is to blame for environmental damage; such a suggestion is often a way of refusing to reduce overconsumption by the affluent. Later on, the encyclical states that abortion can never be viewed as a justification for the protection of nature. The second chapter,

“The Gospel of Creation”, considers the world the way that God intended it. The chapter surveys the rich scriptural traditions to show that there is no biblical justification for “a tyrannical anthropocentrism unconcerned for other creatures.” Likewise, there is no room for misanthropic versions of environmentalism since reverence for nature is only authentic if we have compassion for fellow humans. A person who is truly concerned about the trafficking of endangered species is automatically concerned with the trafficking of humans.

The third chapter, “The Human Roots of the Ecological Crisis”, examines the twin notions of what it calls the “technocratic paradigm” and a “modern anthropocentrism” borne out of a view that sees nature as a mere given, devoid of any spiritual or transcendental value. These notions have led to the misplaced ideas that the earth’s resources are infinite and that economic growth and technology alone can solve global hunger and poverty. In reality, however, a purely materialistic view of reality has not only resulted in disregard for the environment, but also undermined the worth of a human life, especially those forms viewed as having little or no utility - human embryos, the poor, or people with disabilities. At the heart of consumerist and profit-driven economic ideologies is a wrong-footed idea of dominion. The result is exploitation, and a throwaway attitude towards nature and human life itself. The encyclical calls for a bold cultural revolution in our attitude to development and progress. It puts it rather bluntly: “Nobody is suggesting a return to the Stone Age, but we do need to slow down and look at reality in a different way, to appropriate the positive and sustainable progress which has been made, but also to recover the values and

the great goals swept away by our unrestrained delusions of grandeur.”

In the fourth chapter, “Integral Ecology”, the encyclical charts a path to recapture awareness of the interconnectedness of creation. To do so, it is essential to appreciate the impact of environmental degradation on “cultural ecology”, such as those social networks and ways of life which are bound up with the environment in which communities are placed. The experience of indigenous peoples is specifically referred to in this regard. The fifth chapter, “Lines of Approach and Action”, sets out various international collective actions needed. It highlights the imperative to switch from fossil fuels to renewable, with the use of government subsidies where appropriate. It identifies the need for international agreements and legislation not only in relation to climate change but also biodiversity and the oceans. Carbon credits are criticized as “an expedient which permits maintaining the excessive consumption of some countries and sectors.”

The sixth chapter, “Ecological Education and Spirituality”, shifts attention to the individual believer, families and communities, and invites them to make a difference in small but tangible ways. Consumer choices, the cultivation of ecological virtues such as reducing wastefulness, and environmental education for the young are explained as practical steps leading to a deeper, spiritual “ecological conversion” through which the follower of Christ recognizes the true worth of all created entities. The statement “God created the world, writing into it an order and a dynamism that human beings have no right to ignore” stands in the hallowed natural law tradition of Aristotle and Aquinas that every creature has in its nature an end, a telos, which humans should respect and honor. The intrinsic value of non-humans is noted

when the encyclical states that the “ultimate purpose of other creatures is not to be found in us” but rather in the Risen Christ who embraces all things. (Pope Francis 2015).

Catholic Social Teaching on the Environment

St. Pope John Paul II and Benedict XVI in line with the immemorial traditions of Church Teaching maintain a firm stands on the environment. Pope Benedict XVI places ecology in the context of a larger Catholic worldview, and he proposes the only ecology that will ultimately save planet earth is the one that follows God’s plan for creation. However, the green pope does not stand alone. He stands in the line of a rich tradition of Catholic teaching on creation and the good stewardship of that gift. Although the term ecology was coined in 1866, the green movement has been strong only in the past 50 years. Advances in sciences have helped people to become more conscious of the many ways in which their actions affect creation. These discoveries entail new responsibilities in the good stewardship of the earth. As understanding of the environment and the impact of humans has grown, so the Popes have slowly applied the Catholic tradition on creation and stewardship to the new findings of ecology. For example, in 1961 Pope John XXIII made a plea against destroying nature. Also, in 1971, Pope Paul VI expressed concern that by an ill-considered exploitation of nature especially through pollution and the environment is at risk of becoming intolerable for future ages.

Pope John Paul II and the Moral Dimension of Ecology

In a striking way, Pope Benedict XVI’s predecessor, St. Pope John Paul II, understood that environmental problems are ultimately grounded in moral problems, especially the

problem of consumerism. The papacy of St. John Paul II was marked by his promotion of the social teaching of the Catholic Church. With respect to the environment, the late pope holds the unique distinction of dedicating entire papal texts to ecological concerns. On the World Day of Peace, January 1st of 1990, St. John Paul II was supposed to speak about peace, but surprisingly he spoke about the environment, indicating that they are related issues. Like Benedict, St. John Paul II saw environmental concerns only within the larger context of human good. Deane-Drummond, (2016) maintains that Pope St. John Paul's claim is that the lack of peace in the world and the lack of environmental stability spring from the same root, which is human sin. In other words, the ecological crisis is, at its root, a moral problem.

Human Roots of Ecological Crisis

In this area, Pope Francis summarizes the human roots of the ecological crisis (LS 101 – 136). This he does in three categories; firstly, by indicating the link between technology, creativity and power; secondly, by demonstrating how the technocratic paradigm has been globalized and the ever-changing meaning and application of techno science and thirdly, the crisis and effects of anthropocentrism. The main question that begs is; 'What role does the human being play in advancing the ecological crisis?' But first, what is ecology? McIntosh states that ecology is a relatively new science, first introduced by German biologist and philosopher E. H. Haeckel (1834–1919). Going back historically, the term is derived from the Greek word for home (oikos) and so strikes an explicit resonance with the subtitle of Francis's 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si: On Care for Our Common Home*.

However, the meaning of ecology in the narrower biological sense refers to the interrelationship between different organisms and their natural environment, otherwise described as “niches.” Pope Francis acknowledges human origins of ecological crisis. He proposes its focus on the dominant technocratic paradigms and the place of human beings and human action in the world. The ‘roots’ highlighted here are perhaps beyond the technology and techno science aforementioned. Man’s unnecessary and irresponsible and carefree-irreplaceable acts on nature and our environment are simple the roots of most ecological crisis. Against such is the single rewarding decisions of many ecological value-oriented acts.

The African Environment

The continent of Africa is simply blessed with natural and great human resources. Nature and her occurrences seem to be very clement with African continent. Sub-Saharan Africa suffers from some serious environmental problems, including deforestation, soil erosion, desertification, wetland degradation, and insect infestation. But continental African is hallowed with dependable and fruitful humane environment. There isn’t much natural disaster. Instead there are great potentialities and untapped natural minerals and vegetation in African. Most environmental degradation in African is a result of man’s uncontrolled and often annoying interference in nature. Efforts to deal with these problems, however, have been handicapped by a real failure to understand their nature and possible remedies. Africa is the world's second-largest and second-most populous continent, after Asia in both cases. At

about 30.3 million km² (11.7 million square miles) including adjacent islands, it covers 6% of Earth's total surface area and 20% of its land area. Despite her great concentration of wealth especially with regard to natural and of course human resources, recent economic expansion and the large and young population make Africa an important economic market in the broader global context.

However, Africa's climate is dominated by desert conditions along vast stretches of its northern and southern fringes. The central portion of the continent is wetter, with tropical rainforests, grasslands, and semi-arid climates. Temperatures are about the same as those in the desert regions. (Boyes, and Stanis 2011). The continent is surrounded by the Mediterranean Sea to the north, the Isthmus of Suez and the Red Sea to the northeast, the Indian Ocean to the southeast and the Atlantic Ocean to the west. The continent includes Madagascar and various archipelagos. It contains 54 fully recognized sovereign states (countries), eight territories and two de facto independent states with limited or no recognition. Algeria is Africa's largest country by area, and Nigeria is its largest by population. African nations cooperate through the establishment of the African Union, which is headquartered in Addis Ababa. Today, Africa remains the poorest and least-developed continent in the world, hunger, poverty, terrorism, local ethnic and religious conflicts, corruption and bribery, disease outbreaks (OECD 2006). All these were simply orchestrated by inherent bad leadership and long years of Europeans interference in Africa.

Ecological Crisis in Africa

African environmental issues are caused by anthropogenic effects on the African natural environment and have major impacts on humans and nearly all forms of endemic life. Issues include for example deforestation, soil degradation, air pollution, climate change and water scarcity (resulting in problems with access to safe water supply and sanitation). Nearly all of Africa's environmental problems are geographically variable and human induced (Hansen et al. 2013). Thus, they include natural and human man-made disasters. Some of such issues are:

Deforestation

Large scale felling of trees and the resulting decreases in forest areas are the main environmental issues of the African Continent. Rampant clearing of forests and land conversion goes on for agriculture, settlement and fuel needs. Ninety percent of Africa's population requires wood to use as fuel for heating and cooking. As a result, forested areas are decreasing daily, as for example, in the region of equatorial evergreen forests. According to the United Nations Environment Program, Africa's desertification rate is twice that of the world. Nigeria has the highest rate of deforestation of primary forests. Deforestation in Nigeria is caused by logging, subsistence agriculture, and the collection of wood for fuel. According to the Reid Charles (2016) deforestation has wiped out nearly 90% of Africa's forest.

Soil Degradation

The erosion caused by rains, rivers and winds as well as over-use of soils for agriculture and low use of manures have resulted in turning the soils infertile, as for example, in the plains of the Nile and the Orange River. A main cause of soil

degradation is lack of manufactured fertilizers being used, since African soil lacks organic sources of nutrients. The increase in population has also contributed when people need to crop, as a source of income, but do not take measures to protect the soil, due to low income. The current methods create too much pressure on other environmental aspects, such as forests, and are not sustainable. According to Igboin (2012), there are also ecological causes of the poor soil quality. Much of the soil has rocks or clay from volcanic activity. Other causes include erosion, desertification, and deforestation. Another source of soil degradation is the improper management of waste, lack of facilities and techniques to handle waste lead to the dumping of waste in soil, therefore causes soil degradation by process such as leaching.

Degradation of African soil causes decreased food production, damaging ecological effects, and an overall decrease in the quality of living in Africa. This issue would lessen if fertilizers and other cropping supplies were more affordable and thus used more. The United Nations has commissioned a Global Assessment of Human Induced Soil Degradation (GLASOD) to further investigate the causes and state of the soil. Access to information collected is freely available, and it is hoped that awareness will be raised among politicians in threatened areas.

Air Pollution

The air in Africa is greatly polluted due to multiple reasons stated below. The primitive method of farming that takes place in most areas in Africa is certainly a causal factor. The United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) estimate

that 11.3 million hectares of land are being lost annually to agriculture, grazing, uncontrolled burning and fuel wood consumption. Combustion of wood and charcoal are used for cooking and this result to a release of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, which is a toxic pollutant in the atmosphere. Also, due to the poor supply of power, most homes have to rely on fuel and diesel in generators to keep their electricity running. Air pollution in Africa is coming to the forefront and must not be ignored. For example, in South Africa the mercury levels are severe due to coal combustion and gold mining. Mercury is absorbed from the air into the soil and water. The soil allows the crops to absorb the mercury, which humans ingest. Animals eat the grass which has absorbed the mercury and again humans may ingest these animals. Fish absorb the mercury from the water, humans also ingest the fish and drink the water that have absorbed the mercury. This increases the mercury levels in humans. This can cause serious health risks.

It is expected that Africa could represent the half of the world's pollution emissions by 2030, warns Cathy Liousse director of research of atmospheric sounding of the CNRS, along with many other researchers. According to the report, sub-Saharan Africa is experiencing a fast increasing pollution, derived from many causes, such as burning wood for cooking, open burning of waste, traffic, agro-food and chemical industries, the dust from the Sahara carried by the winds through the Sahel area, all this reinforced by a greater population growth and urbanization.

The World Health Organization reports of the need to intervene

when more than one third of the total Disability Adjusted Life Years was lost as a result of exposure to indoor air pollution in Africa. Fuel is needed to power lights at night. The fuel being burned causes great emissions of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. Because of the increased Urbanization in Africa, people are burning more and more fuel and using more vehicles for transportation. The rise in vehicle emissions and the trend towards greater industrialization means the urban air quality in the continent is worsening. This is also the case in many megacities in Nigeria where the key contributors to poor air quality include vehicle emissions, industrial emissions and solid waste burning. Seasonal variations in pollution also exist with the highest levels of air pollution occurring during the dry season (November to March). In many countries, the use of leaded gasoline is still widespread, and vehicle emission controls are nonexistent. Indoor air pollution is widespread, mostly from the burning of coal in the kitchen for cooking. Compounds released from fuel stations and nitrogen and hydrocarbon released from airports cause air pollution. Carbon dioxide other greenhouse gases in the air causes an increase of people with respiratory issues.

There is a common relationship between air pollution and population. Africa is widely diverse between areas that are overpopulated versus areas that are scarcely populated. In regions where there is little industrial development and few people, air quality is high. Vice versa, in densely populated and industrialized regions the air quality is low. Addressing the air pollution in big cities is often a big priority, even though the continent as a whole produces little air pollutants by international standards. Even so, air pollutants are causing a

variety of health and environmental problems. These pollutants are a threat to the population of Africa and the environment they try so hard to sustain.

Climate Change

Climate change in Africa is an increasingly serious threat for Africans as Africa is among the most vulnerable continents to climate change. Anthropogenic climate change is already a reality in Africa, as it is elsewhere in the world. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the vulnerability of Africa to climate change is driven by a range of factors that include weak adaptive capacity, high dependence on ecosystem goods for livelihoods, and less developed agricultural production systems. The risks of climate change on agricultural production, food security, water resources and ecosystem services will likely have increasingly severe consequences on lives and sustainable development prospects in Africa. Managing this risk requires an integration of mitigation and adaptation strategies in the management of ecosystem goods and services, and the agriculture production systems in Africa (Pidwimy 2006).

Over the coming decades, warming from climate change is expected across almost all the Earth's surface, and global mean rainfall will increase. Regional effects on rainfall in the tropics are expected to be much more spatially variable and the sign of change at any one location is often less certain, although changes are expected. Consistent with this, observed surface temperatures have generally increased over Africa since the late 19th century to the early 21st century by about 1 °C, but

locally as much as 3 °C for minimum temperature in the Sahel at the end of the dry season. Observed precipitation trends indicate spatial and temporal discrepancies as expected. The observed changes in temperature and precipitation vary regionally.

In terms of adaptation efforts, regional-level actors are making some progress. This includes the development and adoption of several regional climate change adaptation strategies e.g. SADC Policy Paper Climate Change and the adaptation strategy for the water sector. In addition, there has been other effort to enhance climate change adaptation, such as the tripartite programs on Climate Change Adaptation, Mitigation in Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA-EAC-SADC).

As a supranational organization of 55 member states, the African Union has put forward 47 goals and corresponding actions in a 2014 draft report to combat and mitigate climate change on the continent. The Secretary General of the United Nations has also declared a need for close cooperation with the African Union in order to tackle climate change, in accordance with the UN's sustainable development goals.

Water Scarcity

Water scarcity in Africa is predicted to reach dangerously high levels by 2025. It is estimated that about two-third of the world's population may suffer from fresh water shortage by 2025. The main causes of water scarcity in Africa are physical and economic scarcity, rapid population growth, and climate change. Water scarcity is the lack of fresh water resources to meet the standard water demand. Although Sub-Saharan Africa has a plentiful supply of rainwater, it is seasonal and

unevenly distributed, leading to frequent floods and droughts. Additionally, prevalent economic development and poverty issues, compounded with rapid population growth and rural-urban migration have rendered Sub-Saharan Africa as the world's poorest and least developed region.

The 2012 Report by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations indicates that growing water scarcity is now one of the leading challenges for sustainable development. This is because an increasing number of the river basins have reached conditions of water scarcity through the combined demands of agriculture and other sectors. Impacts of water scarcity in Africa range from health (women and children are particularly affected) to education, agricultural productivity, sustainable development as well as the potential for more water conflicts.

Prevention of Ecological and Environmental Issues

According to Chawla (1999) recycling of wastes entails a lot so as to maintain and balance our environment. It entails conscious conservation of water and other important resources through proper implementation. Such recycling habits into ones daily life is one of the most effective ways to help lessen landfill waste, conserve natural resources, save habitats, reduce pollution, cut down on energy consumption, and slow down global warming. The tips you see below seem like no-brainers; however, it may take to become more aware of your unconscious habits.

These habits are summarized thus: Switch off anything that uses electricity when not in use (lights, televisions, computers,

printers, etc.). Unplug devices when possible; even when an appliance is turned off, it may still use power. Remove chemicals inside of the house; research companies that use plant-derived ingredients for their household cleaning products. Remove chemicals outside of the house; use eco-friendly pesticides and herbicides that won't contaminate groundwater. Consider signing up for a renewable energy producer that uses 100% renewable energy to power homes. Volunteer for cleanups in your community. You can get involved in protecting your watershed, too. Educate others on the importance and value of our natural resources. Public enlightenment is one of the major preventive measures. Knowledge illuminates light into the ignorance of the people. Conserve water. The less water you use, the less runoff and wastewater that eventually end up in the ocean. Buy less plastic and bring a reusable shopping bag. Use energy efficient light bulbs reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Also flip the light switch off when you leave the room! Plant a tree. Trees provide food and oxygen. They help save energy, clean the air, and help combat climate change. Deforestation is harmful. Afforestation is also a solution. Don't send chemicals into our waterways. Choose non-toxic chemicals in the home and office. The development of theories about environmental problems will help to checkmate human activities.

Conclusion

The papal teachings have only caught up with African environmental ethics. However, they lend credibility and prominence to each other's approach and to their common message towards safeguarding our environment. They employ us to consider the common good as a cosmic good wherein

The Catholic Voyage

each creature deserves respect and possesses the right to exist for its good and the good of all. Respect for the environment reflects and reinforces our moral compass as well as represents the veritable beacon for a more equitable global society and a sustainable economic future. Therefore, we should forge a better and more global framework for safeguarding the Earth, our common home.

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