

THEOLOGY AND YEAR OF DIVINE MERCY



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**THEOLOGY AND YEAR OF DIVINE MERCY IN
AFRICAN CONTEXT**

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THE YEAR OF MERCY: AN ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Anthony U Nwachukwu

Abstract

The Year of Mercy is perhaps one of the greatest signs that the wind of hope blows still in our world. It proves that the Spirit of God speaks to the Churches still at a period when the world is facing threats of extinction due to human activities. While it replicates Pope St John XXIII's intention for the Second Vatican Council - opening the window for some freshness, it reminds the world of its constant reliance on God's merciful love and calls humanity to loosen its bond on its captives – the environment. This paper therefore proposes a reinterpretation of the meaning of mercy to encompass even the non human neighbour.

It supposes that the fruition of the Year of Mercy can shine out more fully when we see creation as one family in need of mercy. It then calls for rethink over human abusive treatment of the nonhuman "other". It therefore intends to widen the scope of this call for mercy as God's call for a new heaven and a new earth. It employs the hermeneutic method and adopts the eco- spirituality of St Francis of Assisi.

1.
All things bright and
beautiful,
All creatures great and
small,
All things wise and
wonderful,
The Lord God made
them all.

2.
Each little flower that
opens,
Each little bird that
sings,
He made their glowing
colours,
He made their tiny
wings.

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3.
The rich man in his
castle,
The poor man at his
gate,
God made them high
and lowly,
And ordered their estate.

4.
The purple headed
mountain,
The river running by,
The sunset and the
morning,
That brightens up the
sky

5.
The cold wind in the
winter,
The pleasant summer
sun,
The ripe fruits in the
garden,-
He made them every one

Gone with the Wind

6.
The tall trees in the
greenwood,
The meadows where we
play,
The rushes by the water,
We gather every day

7.
He gave us eyes to see
them,
And lips that we might
tell,
How great is God
Almighty,
Who has made all things
well

1.
All things bright and
beautiful,
All creatures great and
small,
All things wise and
wonderful,
The Lord God made
them all

We learnt this song as little children growing up in a post war rainforest Nigerian village in Igboland. Its words were written by Cecil Frances Alexander and were first published in her Hymns for Little Children. It made impressions on us then as we would use it in our plays during recreation hours in our primary school gardens and in our village squares. We would sit in leisure or play for pleasure, singing this beautiful song in appreciation of God's creation. Beyond that infancy age, deeper impressions started to register as we began to reflect on the meaning of creation especially from our Christian perspective. Sad today, the beautiful sceneries where we played are no more there. The flowers have gone too, and so are our tall iroko and oak trees and the like. The coloured birds with their long or short beaks and their beautifully designed wings which rang us up with their early hour melodious tones are nowhere to be seen. All these have gone ... yes, gone with the wind.

Introduction

Growing up as a young boy in that village setting was beautiful. While other human beings around us were brothers and sisters and uncles, aunts, cousins, nephews and nieces and the like, trees and grasses would display the beauty of nature at its best. Animals, fish, birds in the sky, delicious locusts and tasty caterpillars, ants and insects, butterflies and flies in their different colours with the greenery providing habitat and food and medicine, all adorned creation in that rainforest region of pre and post-war Eastern Nigeria. We played around the village squares plucking fruits that nature provided in the wild and drank sparkling clean water from rain or rivers and streams. Birds sang all daylong and creeping things and the insects. Indeed there was such variety that one would really look up around the environment and burst into a jubilant praise of God, the creator. Creation reminded us of God and his wisdom.

So close to us was nature and this in harmony too. Our villages were marked and distinguished by their thick forests with varieties of tall huge trees like the iroko, many of which exist now in tales. The village squares, ever cool, were hidden under such irokos and oaks. Our homes were constructed near a collection where they shielded us from the sun yet they provided fruits and fire wood. We collected from nature the much we needed and nature used the rest to replenish itself in an unbroken chain, men and nature interacted – and our ancestors in their own time told us tales about the relationship our villages have – with those trees and animals that we dared not touch: they were all sacred gifts from the gods. They told us either how those protected or saved our forefathers, who were probably foragers, a legend quite similar to that of the beast breastfeeding Romulus and Remus, founders of the city of Rome, in its cave (see N.S Gill, 2014). Those irokos never fell on nor crushed our homes, neither did floods sweep us off for we had our pacts in peace. There was a symbiosis, an ecology where animals, plants and mankind formed members of the same ecosystem. There was symbiotic living and harmony between humans and nature, a flow of lyrics and rhythms in the symphony of creation.

This attests to the biblical account that creation is a piece from a perfect musician and master artist who knows how to place and fix things in their proper places and time. This affirms indeed the biblical testimonial that everything God made is indeed very good (Gen 1:31) and purposeful. We cannot but repeat and sing:

All things bright and beautiful
All creatures great and small
All things wise and wonderful
The Lord God made them all.

The Problem

Gone with the wind is this beauty, this rhythm, harmony and symphony, this beautiful song of nature in our homes and localities. The varieties in both fauna and flora are fast disappearing. The symbiotic chain is broken. Gone also with the wind is this closeness and friendship in nature. In its place is that "enmity between your offspring and her offspring" (Gen 3:15) pronounced by God over the sin of Adam. Sin disrupts, sin destroys and sin ruins communion and harmony and estranges from a supposed symbiotic relationship and makes one the enemy of his brother and sister. And so is the sin against the environment. It all began when new and enthusiasts came up with alien mentality of separation of humans and the environment. They told us that filth is when a tree branch holds out over the house top, of the danger of shrubs, of grasses, animals and indeed enforced a norm of hatred between mankind and the environment. Government imposed penalties on all who would not cut down trees within a given range around our homes. Our oranges and pear trees as well as our palm and raffia trees (cf. Ikegwu Jacinta U, 2014) were cut down, our breadfruit and udara trees were all mowed down to allow for electric cables that often had no electric currents. Slow and steady, our environment was defaced and the forests fled. We lost touch with nature.

More recently, the issue of deforestation has come to limelight as a major cause of the environmental crisis the world is experiencing today. WWF, Eschootoday, Enviropol as well as the various organs of the UN inform us at the international stage of its dangers. Many governmental and interest groups and individuals feed us with particular contextual challenges arising because of deforestation and its consequences. The publication of Pope Francis' encyclical on the environment, *Laudato si*, and his declaration of the Holy Jubilee Year of Mercy provoke thought over the present situation of our ecologically throttled earth which he described as our "common home". This is of utmost concern demanding the attention of

everyone irrespective of colour, language, gender or creed. The opening of the Holy Door in this Year of Mercy is an invitation for a rethink in this direction.

The paper stands on the pedestal provided by the scientific research that the destruction of our trees and forests are responsible for our loss of the habitats, climate change, global warming, and the consequent ecological crises in our time. It then hypothesizes that those disappearing micro-organisms, threatened plants and animal species count among the poor and needy crying out loud for mercy. The paper therefore demands falling back on these contributions by the current Pope in order to chart a new course towards protection and conservation of that common heritage, the earth, the theatre of life.

Revisiting the Ecological Question

Discussions on theology and the Year of Mercy cannot be complete without casting a new look at the ecological crisis facing the world today due to this loss of harmony in creation. This concern for the environment featured prophetically in the 22nd CIWA international Theology Week Conference (2011) which discussed Theology for Sustainable Ecology in Africa. The organizers of the 2011 must have been present day Zachaeus who could predict the way a new Pope would take. Above all, the participants dealt with the issue in detail and that made for a good piece of literature for discussions on ecology anywhere. Reading that work elicits hope and joy.

Nevertheless, there is need to factor ecological concern in the world today into discussions on the Year of Mercy. The 22nd Theology Week is already five years behind. While the relevance remains appreciated, the truths still valid, and the contributions still expedient, one will not deny the fact that new questions are arising everyday which require new approaches and new emphases. At the international community's meeting at the Paris summit on climate change at the end of 2015, conservation featured prominently. More importantly, the Holy Father's Encyclical on the environment.

Laudato si, is a call for dialogue and new discussion at all levels of society and in every context over the menaced-earth. The Year of Mercy is a new window, providing the compass for sustainable navigation. These contributions need to be synthesized using a language that addresses the problems of today. ~~This has informed the need for revisiting this subject (again) in a Theology Week Conference here in CIWA.~~

Moreover, concern for the environment pertains to every age as there is always that nostalgic feeling for one's familiar environment, as the Pope pointed out. The present situation of an earth at the verge of collapse and extinction, God's creation entrusted to mankind for governance (Gen 1:28) and care (Gen 2:15), ignites in our souls and hearts the burning desire to do something and save an ailing earth as it cries and gasps for breath and survival. This becomes more expedient because of the extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy. All these developments have informed the need for revisiting this subject ~~again~~ in a Theology Week Conference here in CIWA.

The Jubilee Year of Mercy

The entire Catholic world has greeted with welcome and admiration the declaration of Holy Jubilee Year of Mercy for this year, 2016. Many Ecclesiastical Provinces, national and regional Bishops' Conferences and more have mapped out strategies and plans on the celebration of this Year of Mercy, convinced of its advantages in the lives of Christians and the world as a whole, especially in an age that is steeped in violence and bloodshed like the present age. The prayer for the Jubilee Year of Mercy is said in many parishes all over the world. This Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy is a call by Pope Francis on the Church and by extension, all mankind to extend the hand of mercy to one another, especially, the poor and the needy.

Generally, Jubilees evoke joy, peace and celebration. A Jubilee Year is a special season of grace offered to God's people. A Jubilee Year of Mercy is an invitation and an offering made to God's people, according to Pope Francis, to experience and to focus on forgiveness and healing in a special way. The purpose is to help them grow spiritually, strengthen their faith, and encourage works of service, and to promote unity within the Catholic Church and society in general (Pope Francis' Year of Mercy, <http://dynamiccatholic.com/year-of-mercy/>). It offers opportunity for rest too in accordance with the biblical seventh day rest (the Sabbath day rest), the sabbatical year, and the jubilee (after the 49th year). Celebrating it at least once in 50 years affords many people the opportunity to gain from this channel of grace and to suck the milk of God's compassionate heart.

It derives from the Hebrew *jobel* – the joyful shout or clamour of trumpets by which the year was announced (The Year of Jubilee, in Bible Study Tools). The biblical root for Jubilee Year is Leviticus 25 where regulations and rules guiding them are laid down. Celebrated every 50 years, it addresses recreation (rest), inequality, poverty, gratitude and forgiveness, and regulations on land use and conservation. The social and spiritual benefices of Jubilees, according to Scripture, includes remedy for evils in society and government, observance of the law, justice, correction of wrong attitudes to material possession, exploitation and extortion (cf. William Smith, 2014. "Bible Study Tools" in Smith's Bible Dictionary, Bible Study Tools). For instance, Pope St John Paul II announced, in connection with the 26th Jubilee Year, that "Justice, according to the Law of Israel, consisted above all in the protection of the weak" (St. John Paul II, *Tertio millenio adveniente* no. 13).

Jubilee in the Catholic Church derives from this OT Jewish religious root. It began in AD 1300 during the papacy of Boniface VII. In response to the plight of the many people who came to Rome to repent at the tombs of Sts. Peter and Paul at the wake of much

suffering from war and plague, Pope Boniface VII proclaimed a "year of forgiveness of all sins" in 1300, hence the first ordinary Jubilee year (EWTN, The Jubilee in Church History). Pius XII called for a jubilee in 1950 to pray for the promotion of social justice, and assistance of the poor and needy in a world that was still nursing the pains and wounds of the just ended World War II. Following in the footsteps of Pius XII, Francis, finding the need for mercy in our time, called for an extraordinary year of mercy, making it the 27th Jubilee in the history of the Catholic Church. In his Angelus on January 11, 2015, he stated: "There is so much need of mercy today" and demanded the lay faithful to live it and bring it into different social environments (Vatican Radio, 13/3/2015/17.05). About this Jubilee Year,

This is the time of mercy.... With the Jubilee of Mercy, Pope Francis focuses attention upon the merciful God who invites all men and women to return to Him. The encounter with God inspires in one the virtue of mercy.

In the homily for his Lenten Penitential service of 13 March 2013, the third anniversary of his Papacy, Pope Francis announced his intention for the jubilee: making the church see herself as one called to be a witness to mercy.

Mercy is deep at the heart of the Holy Father, Francis. On 13 March 2015, during his homily for a Lenten penitential service, the Holy Father, Pope Francis announced that the extraordinary Jubilee will be dedicated to a theme close to his heart: "mercy" (Elise Harris, Mar 13, 2015 / 10:05 am, CNA/EWTN News). In his word, "Beginning December 8, 2015, the Holy Year of Mercy will focus on studying and reflecting on mercy, receiving mercy, and being merciful towards others". He used the word, 'mercy', 32 times in his exhortation, *Evangelium Gaudium*. He had chosen as his motto the expression,

“miserando atque eligendo”, a title that paints him so much as someone with a compassionate and empathic personality. He culled it from a homily of St Bede the Venerable, on the Gospel passage of the calling of Matthew. This homily is a tribute to divine mercy. This theme of mercy has so far featured so prominently that one may say that it is the major motif behind his activities and ministry as Pope. It has occupied a central space in his speeches in both formal assemblies and informal gatherings. And during his first Angelus after his election as Pope, he stated:

Feeling mercy, that this word changes everything. This is the best thing we can feel: it changes the world. A little mercy makes the world less cold and more just. We need to understand properly this mercy of God, this merciful Father who is so patient” (Angelus, March 17, 2013).

In his Angelus message of 11 January, 2015, he declared that this age is in need of mercy and exhorted everyone on the need to live it and to bring it to different social environments. In the Bull of Indiction for the Extraordinary Year of Mercy, *Misericordiae Vultus*, published on the eve of Divine Mercy Sunday 2015, the Holy Father gives a foundational explanation that located mercy at the core of the Church’s being, life and mission. As it was the centre point of Christ’s mission, so it is with the Church whose head is Christ.

This Year of Mercy is therefore intended to be a special period for the Catholic Church as it is the time for the Church across the world to take approximately a year to focus on forgiveness and healing in a special way. The Holy Father invites all Christ’s faithful and, by extension, all humankind, to focus “attention upon the merciful God who invites all men and women to return to Him. The encounter with God inspires in one the virtue of mercy”.

The Needy and the Subject of Mercy

The analysis of the word by St Thomas Aquinas offers us great assistance on the Christian understanding of the meaning and nature of mercy. Mercy is experienced and exercised by a person who has another person in his power, or under his authority, or from whom no kindness can be claimed (<http://www.theopedia.com/mercy>). Drawing from St Augustine's definition as the heartfelt sympathy for another's distress, impelling us to succour him if we can (*Augustine, De Civ. Dei ix, 5*), St Thomas Aquinas defined it as "the compassion in our hearts for another person's misery, a compassion which drives us to do what we can to help him" (ST, II-II, q. 30, a. 1). The characteristic of mercy is rooted in God and experienced in relation to God, from whom it may be acquired as a Christian virtue and exercised in relation to fellow human beings (Colin Brown, *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan Pub. House, 1975), 2:593-601). Showing mercy is therefore proper to God in a special way, for it manifests His infinite perfection and His omnipotence (St Thomas Aquinas, ST, II-II, q. 30, a. 4; Pope Francis' assertion that God's omnipotence is shown in mercy is drawn from this teaching). Thus, we can speak of the mercy God may show toward human beings, who are all ultimately within his power or that which a human being may show to another person (Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961; Veronica Arntz, 2015. *Toward a Catholic Understanding of "Mercy"* <http://www.onepeterfive.com/toward-a-catholic-understanding-of-mercy/>).

The human need for mercy has been at the centre of Christian life and worship. Its foundation goes back to the creation – fall pericope in the book of Genesis while the entire Christian mystery (the entire salvation history), is all about God's loving kindness and merciful action in human history. The OT is all about God's merciful intervention in Israelite history. With the new covenant, the mercy of

God is seen in the death of Jesus Christ; the sacrificial death is in itself a merciful act, demonstrating the divine compassion and making possible the forgiveness of sins. From this follows the requirement for all Christians, who are by definition recipients of mercy, to exercise mercy and compassion toward fellow human beings (cf. W. L. Reed, *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Chico, Calif.: Scholar's Press, 1881), 23:35-41 in Theopedia; cf. Also, John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia*, DM, nos. 13, 14, 15).

The Holy Father's calls for this Holy Jubilee Year of Mercy is an invitation to reflect on the love of God who is rich in mercy, to come and draw water from the streams of the Saviour (DM, no. 14). In his Letter to Archbishop Rino Fisichella, the President of the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization, the Pope identified his audience and beneficiaries for the Jubilee Year:

1. all believers to whom is offered a true moment of encounter with the mercy of God.
2. all goes to all the faithful, especially who confess within the period and who make pilgrimages to the Holy Doors in cathedral Churches
3. the sick and people who are elderly and alone, often confined to the home.
4. the incarcerated,
5. those faithful who for various reasons choose to attend churches officiated by priests of the Fraternity of St Pius X.

These make up the ordinary beneficiaries (Catholic Herald News, Tuesday 1 September, 2015). These are already within the Churchfold. Extraordinary beneficiaries would be those who live far, that is, outside and beyond the confines of the Catholic Church. No. 23 of the Bull, MV, attests to the ecumenical and interreligious value of the Jubilee Year of Mercy while conscious of the sensibilities involved. Following the outline already traced by the Fathers of the

Second Vatican Council in *Lumen Gentium* (cf. LG, 13; 14), the Year of Mercy is addressed first and foremost to members of the Catholic Church. Secondly, to all Christians and, thirdly, to all men and women since the Church, as light, sent to illumine and restore all men to God (Eph 1: 15), has the entire world as its mission field. The universal scope of this field has its foundation in the biblical tradition. It becomes clearer in the mission mandate of Matthew chapter 28 and in Christ's final exhortation to his apostles before his return to the Father: You shall be my witnesses, not only in Judea and Samaria... but to the utmost bounds of the earth (Acts 1: 8).

There exists still another group of beneficiaries, those creatures lower than human beings. This comprises of animals, birds, fishes and plants, and indeed, all biotic and abiotic creatures which lie so much at the mercy of human choices and activities for their continued existence. These creatures are under the power and authority of human beings (see Gen 1: 26-28). The future of these beings depends so much on the human will. Erroneously, they have been subjected to all forms of maltreatments and abuses by their human overlords. Biblically, these creatures have provided imageries and metaphors for elucidating the relationship between God and His people as well as the precariousness of the human condition outside God's love and mercy, primarily they form part of the created universe entrusted to humans for governance and care/cultivation (Gen 1:28; 2:7). Subjected under human authority and power, it behoves on mankind to feel and exercise mercy over these lower creatures. Including them among the beneficiaries in this Year of Mercy is both in agreement with the characteristic of mercy and gives this Jubilee Year of Mercy its cosmic slant. Importantly, the Church has ever counted these creatures among the needy, poor and the wounded. For this reason, the Holy Father, following in the footsteps of St Francis of Assisi, regards them as brothers and sisters who are crying out to us for hearing (*Laudato Si*, no. 1).

The poverty in biblical and theological languages is not restricted to material poverty. Within the inter-testamental period, the poor, "anawim", could have referred probably to the materially, socially and politically excluded whose only hope lied in God their saviour. Israel, as a nation, had been subjected to this condition at various stages of its history by the various superpowers under whose authority they had come, the last being the Romans. As the coming of the promised Messiah became more imminent, it became extended to include those maidens who committed themselves to praying ceaselessly in expectation for the future Messiah promised through the prophets (cf. Isaiah 7:14). Mary, the Mother of Jesus, associated herself with these "maidens in expectation". The poor in the teaching of Jesus encompasses also the lowly, the humble, those who are open in spirit, the docile. Included also are the ignorant and the sick as well as all the suffering and those in bondage, that is, those held in check by physical, economic, cultural, religious, political and social structures and spiritual ties. Today the hermeneutic has continued to shift to include both human and non-human beings, especially, all whose beings and lives are being gauged and stifled by others. All these constitute the needy. The present condition of these categories of creatures, human and non-human, requires attention. This condition is summarized in the "cry" of the earth, our common home (LS, 1).

The Church's mission consists in searching out for sinners and in extending to the needy that mercy hand of Jesus who has come not to judge the world but to unite the world with the Father (cf. MV. no. 20). The Church is primarily sent wherever there is human heart and breath, especially wherever human life is stifled and gorged, and for the most part, to the poor, the needy, the oppressed, the excluded. She is called to become the voice of the voiceless and hope for the oppressed. She is sent to continue the mission of Jesus who came to announce the good news to the poor, set captives free and proclaim the year of God's favour (Luke 4: 18-19). Concerned over the

situation of those in “uncertain and painful situations”; those with wounds “borne by the flesh of those who have no voice because their cry is muffled and drowned out by the indifference of the rich”, the Church has duty to announce hope and joy to these throttled creatures. Christ the unique saviour of the world, through his Vicar on earth, invites the Church during this Holy Year of Mercy “to heal these wounds, to assuage them with the oil of consolation, to bind them with mercy and cure them with solidarity and vigilant care” (MV, no. 15). The Holy Father admonishes:

Let us open our eyes and see the misery of the world, the wounds of our brothers and sisters who are denied their dignity, and let us recognize that we are compelled to heed their cry for help! May we reach out to them and support them so they can feel the warmth of our presence, our friendship, and our fraternity! May their cry become our own, and together may we break down the barriers of indifference that too often reign supreme and mask our hypocrisy and egoism! (MV, no. 15).

According to Pope Francis, the commitment is to live by mercy so as to obtain the grace of complete and exhaustive forgiveness by the power of the love of the Father who excludes no one (Catholic Herald News, 1 September 2015), including non-human creatures.

Reading *Laudato Si* in the Year of Mercy

Dating the encyclical on ecology, *Laudato Si* (LS), just few days after the declaration of the Jubilee Year of Mercy and the publication of the Bull of Indiction, *Misericordiae Vultus* (MV), explains why the two documents should not be studied in isolation. The obvious indication of their internal unity is so clear in the content and development of the two documents signed by the same Holy Father. These compel the reader to conclude that the two documents form

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one consistent whole. They display a correlation and an interconnection of ideas and serve as doors and windows to reading the heart and mind of Pope Francis who has displayed a great deal of empathy and fellow-feeling with the poor and the needy. In each of these documents, the poor, the needy and the sinner belong to the same bloc of brothers and sisters whose cries for help, care and mercy plead for hearing and attention from the privileged. This is the point of convergence between *Misericordiae Vultus* and *Laudato Si*.

The language of both documents speaks volumes. In *LS* we read: "The Creator does not abandon us; he never forsakes his loving plan or repents of having created us" while he writes in *MV*: "God is always ready to forgive, and he never tires of forgiving in ways that are continually new and surprising. Nevertheless, all of us know well the experience of sin" (*MV*, no. 22). Quite undogmatic in style, yet they persuasively invite the reader to dialogue and conversion. They all point out the need for renewal and transformation in our relationship with one another and with God, in our individual and collective interactions with the environment (our common home).

The centrality of care for the condition of the poor and the theme of mercy in the ministry and teaching of Pope Francis is indicated firstly in the choice of a name for his papacy. By choosing the name "Francis", after St Francis of Assisi, the new Pope chooses this saint of the Middle Ages, a lover of nature and friend of the poor, for inspiration. His motto too, "miserando atque eligendo", further illustrates that "mercy is at the centre of his heart" (Elise Harris, Mar 13, 2015 / 10:05 am, CNA/EWTN News).

Dated 24 May, 2015, just a few days after the publication of the Bull of Indiction, *Misericordiae Vultus* (*MV*), explains the similarity of ideas which abound in both *Laudato Si* (*LS*) and the Bull, *MV*. Among these ideas are sin, mercy, and conversion. There is a

common recognition of the destructive power of sin in the two documents. While agreeing that sin is a consequence of the rupture of relationship, one focuses on the effects of sin on human community and the other extends it to non-human creatures. Whichever, the said sin surges from the human heart and conduct and attitudes: "the warming of the planet is a symptom of a greater problem: the developed world's indifference to the destruction of the planet as they pursue short-term economic gains" (Wikipedia, *Laudato Si*. en.wikipedia.org/wiki/laudato_si). This indifference results in a "throwaway culture" in which unwanted items and unwanted people, such as the unborn, the elderly, and the poor, are treated and discarded as waste (Wikipedia, *Laudato Si*).

Finally, the Jubilee Year of Mercy stresses the sinner's need for conversion since "we are called to gaze even more attentively on mercy" which is "the ultimate and supreme act by which God comes to meet us" (MV, nos. 3, 2, and 15). This sinner is mankind – charged against the environment, the mighty against the weak, and the rich against the poor. Thus, the themes of mercy and conversion converge in the human person who is at the one end the culprit and the victim, while on the other being the perpetrator (predator) who is also part of the threatened. MV, while explaining the dependence of all creation on the all merciful God, stresses the need for the strong and the mighty to be merciful like our heavenly Father (Luke 6:). Hence, the Jubilee Year of Mercy addresses the needy, the poor and the sinner whereas the encyclical indicts such human actions as the use and throw away culture which create poverty and endanger the sphere of life (see LS, nos. 16, 20-22, 43). The encyclical therefore focuses on the precarious condition of the non-human victims (as sisters and brothers, cf. LS, nos. 1 and 2), the consequences of such conditions on humans, especially the poor, and moves progressively calls all men and women to conversion (LS, nos. 5 and 6).

The condition of the poor and the call to conversion are among the core concerns of the social teaching of the Church. Moving from the call to conversion, the Pope calls humanity to move "towards an ecological conversion in which we can listen to the 'cry of the earth and the cry of the poor'. To use religious language, what the Pope is calling for is conversion" (Fr Thomas Rosica, 2015. *Laudato Si, Signore, for the Story Within*. saltandlighttv.org). Conversion in either respect would entail transcending the mere expression of remorse, for a more proactive step in which metanoia both translates into mercy towards the other and becomes tangible in care for the most vulnerable. The awareness of the destructive power of sin, coupled with the condition of the poor, whether of the human poor who cannot attain self-actualization on their own, who cannot live out more fully their vocation as human persons due to the situations in which they find themselves and that of a degraded earth and non-renewed natural environment necessitate this call for conversion. Hence, marking the beginning of this Jubilee Year is no more the blowing of the Judaic trumpet, but the opening of the Holy Door, symbolizing the access to the wellspring of mercy from our God who is full of mercy (dives in misericordiae) and opportunity granted to the poor and the excluded who are far away to suck the milk of God's life-giving compassion and drink as from a wellspring the water of life (Is 44:3; John 4: 14; 7:38; Apoc. 21:6; 22:1, 17): "May the balm of mercy reach everyone, both believers and those far away, as a sign that the Kingdom of God is already present in our midst" (MV, no. 6). Thus, reading *Laudato Si* within this year of mercy provides a wider scope a cosmic conception of mercy inherent in the theology of St Paul, an approach that Pope Francis draws from St Francis of Assisi's *Canticle of Nature*.

The Ecological Question and the Poor

Pope Francis points out that there is an "intimate relationship between the poor and the fragility of the planet, the conviction that everything in the world is connected", (LS, no. 16) and that "nothing is indifferent to us" (LS, nos. 3-6). The two documents point towards authentic witnessing and experiencing of the love of God both vertically and horizontally. This is prefigured in the Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, where the joy of the Gospel is presented as a deeply individual and collective invitation to reflect on the gap between the life we live now and the life God calls us to live. This is an invitation to love God and our neighbour more fully. It is an invitation to live more fully in the midst of the opportunities and challenges that each day presents (<http://dynamiccatholic.com/year-of-mercy>). The raging issue today is crisis of a threatened earth.

This explanation takes us to the Church's doctrine of creation where both nature and humans constitute members of the one family of creation, in which, for both St Francis of Assisi and Pope Francis, every creature is either a brother or a sister. He links protection of people with protection of the environment. Inspired by the Psalmist, the Holy Father writes:

He forgives all your iniquity, he heals all your diseases, he redeems your life from the pit, he crowns you with steadfast love and mercy (Ps 103:3-4). Another psalm, in an even more explicit way, attests to the concrete signs of his mercy: 'He executes justice for the oppressed; he gives food to the hungry. The Lord sets the prisoners free; the Lord opens the eyes of the blind. The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down The Lord watches over the sojourners, he upholds the widow and the fatherless....' (Ps 146:7-9). Here are some other expressions of the Psalmist: 'He heals the

brokenhearted, and binds up their wounds... The Lord lifts up the downtrodden, he casts the wicked to the ground' (Ps 147:3, 6).

Thus the poor are "our brothers and sisters" who have been afflicted. This group includes nature and all it holds; forests, and their plants, animals and microorganisms are among those beings "who have no voice because their cry is muffled and drowned out by the indifference" of humans; they have been the victims of human violence, abuse and greed. The condition of the poor receives much attention in LS since the Holy Father sees a necessary link between the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor (cf. LS, A prayer for our earth and A Christian prayer in union with creation).

The major concern of the Holy Father, in the encyclical includes the ecological crisis which threatens the earth today (in nos. 20 – 47) and the human attitude towards all this (nos. 53 - 60). The Pope shows an inner connection between the two. He likens the situation of the threatened earth to that of a crying poor, remarking that the crisis of the environment is taken analogically as the crisis of human brotherhood, where the cries and tears and grief of one, as a sister (no. 2), or the poor, demands a listening ear and attention (nos. 15, 16). Whether as sister or nature, their present predicaments are outcomes of human activities. As indicated in the findings of science, the earth's resources have been so much depleted that pollution, waste and the throwaway culture (which affects the excluded just as it quickly reduces things to rubbish, and the earth to a heap of filth, nos. 20 – 25), depletion of fresh water (nos. 27 – 32) and the loss of biodiversity (nos. 33 – 42) and the felt and experienced unequal social effects, that is, social degradation (nos. 26, 48 – 52) have created tremendous environmental problems that impact so heavily on the "most vulnerable people on the planet" (Francis X. Rocca and Stephen Nakrosis, 2015).

The impact of a degraded earth on social condition of people is the focus of nos. 48- 52. The Holy Father calls this “social degradation”. Accordingly he said: “human environment and the natural environment deteriorate together; we cannot adequately combat environmental degradation unless we attend to causes related to human and social degradation” (cf. no.43). He thus recapitulates the teachings of his predecessors for whom there is a link between the environment and humans. John Paul II, while highlighting the ethical implications of environmental abuse, spoke about environmental justice and environmental sin (John Paul XII, Message World Day of Peace, January 1, 1990. no. 6). For Benedict XVI, “the the book of nature is one and indivisible”, hence no aspect of it can be more fruitfully analyzed when isolated from the rest. In *Caritas in Veritate* Benedict XVI includes such issues as life, sexuality, marriage, the family, education, social relations: in a word, human development and human responsibility towards the environment, the poor, future generations and humanity as a whole (including the unborn) and the continuity of the world around us as integral aspects of any sustainable ecology (cf. *Caritas in Veritate*, no. 51). All these fit in into the overall picture of the environment entrusted to man’s care, of which he is called to cultivate and, according to St Maximus the Confessor, to lead back to God, the final rest of our movements (A. U. Nwachukwu, 2016). It follows that “the deterioration of nature is closely connected to the culture which shapes human coexistence” (Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, 29). Pope Francis speaks of social inequality and environmental refugees as examples of the social consequences of environmental deterioration.

Back home here in Africa, the above position affirms the views expressed in Anthony Iffen Umoren (2011) and Odoh, S.I. and Chilaka Francis Chigozie (2012) that climate change impacts on human life and society (see LS nos. 48-52). Umoren (2011), in his paper at the 2011 Theology Week Conference, describes noise pollution as “one of the worst forms of environmental degradation”

and shows how it affects the health of both humans and livestock, birds and other living organisms found within the same environment as much as how their vibrations shake plants buildings and walls (Anthony Iffen Umoren, 2011) while Odo and Chilaka (2012) identifies change in the climate as one of the main causes of conflict in human societies. In all this, the poor are the most vulnerable. Pope Francis's call to strengthen the conviction that we are one single human family (LS, no. 52) and his demand for mercy, especially on the needy properly justifies this encyclical among the compendium of the Church's social doctrine, the basis of which can be drawn from the Christian theology of creation.

Creation and Purposefulness

LS calls the earth/creation our common home. This earth occupies a very special place in the life and mission of the Church. It first of all refers to the created world. Belief in a created world, which the Church shares in common with the other Abrahamic religions, forms an integral part of the central articles of the Christian faith. Common to all these religions is the belief that the world, comprising of both heaven and earth, and everything in it, is created by God and belongs to him. Common to these religions as well is the confession of man's special place in the midst of the earth's array of creatures as the only being that bears the image of God.

The first two chapters of the Book of Genesis (the Book of the Beginnings) feed us with ample information about the created world and everything in it. Though exegetical studies may discover a wide range of differences, their oneness is evident in the manner in which the first narrative (chapter one) flows progressively into the second chapter. For example, the Sabbath rest which marked the conclusion of the first creation narrative is located deep inside chapter two (2:2-3). It assumes a central place in recent ecological discussions since it presents the universe in a picture of a web of interactions where

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heaven breaks forth like the dawn and earth emerges, where theology meets with anthropology, the all good God who dwells in unapproachable light, whose name YWH cannot be vocalized, the ineffable God assumes a name – Active Presence (I Am. Cf. Exodus 3:14, 15, see J.D. Douglas et als., eds *The New Bible Dictionary*), as God condescends to meet man in a dialogue of being and mission. In it lies also the basis for the interaction and interconnection between mankind and the rest of the created world. "...we ourselves are dust of the earth (cf. Gen 2:7); our very bodies are made up of her elements, we breathe her air and we receive life and refreshment from her waters" (LS, no. 2). The Holy Father, Francis, following the example of St Francis of Assisi, found it therefore natural to address creatures as man's brothers and sisters since man's body is drawn from the same substance with them.

Drawing then from Scripture, Christianity teaches the following:

- the world as created by God is very good (Gen 1: 31) and purposeful;
- every creature, animate or inanimate, has an inherent goodness underlying that nature which God the maker has assigned it
- creation, that is, the world and all it contains, belongs to God (Lev 25:) and that
- creation gives God delight (Gen 1: 31).

Regarding their purposefulness, the Church teaches also that each creature has a relationship with others and God in which it serves

- by revealing God (Rom 1: 20; Ps 104; Exodus 20:4–5, Romans 1:19–20, Mark 12:29–31, John 3:16, John 6:38, John 17:20–23),
- glorifying God (Dan: 3; Ps 19: 1-4; 65:9–13; 96:10–13) and
- delighting God, and that

- at the end, the eschaton, all will be consummated in Christ (Eph 1: 10; Col 1: 15-20).

Christian magisterial teachings and theological reflections, drawing from biblical tradition, has taught John Paul II's Peace with God, Peace with Creation demands: "The human race is called to explore this order, to examine it with due care and to make use of it while safeguarding its integrity." This development, in agreement with the teaching of Scripture, has maintained that every creature of God has intrinsic value and goodness in spite of early misconceptions which crept into Christianity from the pagan philosophy of the then Greco-Roman world. Thus creation is more than mere landscape (Dussel, 1988) because it serves human need (Ademola Tokumboh Salau, 1993) and provides us with objects for the worship of God the creator (Dussel, 1988)). In gratitude to God, the Catholic liturgy, for example, defines bread and the wine as "gifts from God" and "fruit of the earth" for divine worship. The primordial tree played a crucial role in the fall of Adam, the tree received a new status as the means by which Christ cancelled the wages of that fall and effected our redemption. This lifts the produce of the earth to a sublime status which will reach its apogee in the communion with God (LS, no. 243).

The Book of the Prophet Daniel shows in quite a distinct manner that the goal of every being, animate or inanimate, is the praise of the Lord. This is constituted in their being and nature. Hence he invited each created thing to perform this duty by raising their voices in praise of God. In the Book we read:

Let the earth bless the Lord. Praise and exalt him above all forever. Mountains and hills, bless the Lord. Everything growing from the earth, bless the Lord. You springs, bless the lord. Seas and rivers, bless the Lord. You dolphins and all water creatures, bless the Lord. Everything growing from the

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earth, bless the Lord. All you birds of the air, bless the Lord.
All you beasts, wild and tame, bless the Lord, you sons of
men, bless the Lord (Dan 3:52).

The title and opening statement of Pope Francis's encyclical, *Laudato Si*, is taken from St Francis of Assisi's hymn of nature in which he sang the praise of God through nature. The words say "Be praised oh God, through my brother sun" and the same for the moon (sister), and the stars, and the rest (Canticle of the Creatures, in Francis of Assisi: *Early Documents*, New York-London-Manila, 1999, 113-114., LS, no. 87). In this song, St Francis re-echoes the Book of Daniel where every being is a member of a world choir called to acknowledge the maker. Christian tradition exemplified in the teachings of St Francis of Assisi, Gregory Palamas (Orthodox) and the Protestant Reformers, Luther and Calvin, all bear witness to the pervasiveness of this teaching across the various divides in Christendom and therefore understood creation as a symphony called into being from nothingness to sing the glory of the maker and make him manifest. In that choir, mankind is the choir conductor.

From the early 14th century Eastern Orthodox tradition, Gregory Palamas bore witness to this: 'God is the nature of all things, and he transcends every nature. He remains wholly within himself, and dwells wholly within us'. For Luther, 'The power of God is present at all places even in the thinnest leaf... God is entirely and personally present in the wilderness, in the garden, and in the field' (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, *Awakening to God's Call to Earthkeeping*), while Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book 1 Chapter 5, Section 1, reads:

We cannot open our eyes without being compelled to behold God ... on each of God's works. God's glory is engraved in characters so bright, so distinct, and so illustrious, that none,

however dull and illiterate, can plead ignorance as their excuse.

These firmly affirm the purposefulness of nature and the sacredness which saturates it. Since it is imbued with and filled with the presence of God, hence the need to treat it with reverence. In the pages of nature is God's glory.

In more recent times, scientists, environmentalists, theologians and the rest present an ecological picture of the earth. These accept that the earth is our common home and that it is endowed with immeasurable resources which serve the physical needs of both human and non-human species such as protection (from Greenhouse Gases – GHCs), food and energy need of mankind, of people today and for generations to come. Nature itself is adorned with swarms of complex structures, systems and organisms. In its countless ecosystems and biodiversities, in the differences and similarities between them, these altogether form a common choir of creation singing the symphony of God's praise, goodness and glory, yet serving the need of other created living beings. In no. 48 of his *Caritas in Veritate*, Bendeict XVI states:

Nature expresses a design of love and truth. It is prior to us, and it has been given to us by God as the setting for our life. Nature speaks to us of the Creator (cf. Rom 1:20) and his love for humanity. It is destined to be 'recapitulated' in Christ at the end of time (cf. Eph 1:9-10; Col 1:19-20). Thus it too is a 'vocation'. Nature is at our disposal not as 'a heap of scattered refuse', but as a gift of the Creator who has given it an inbuilt order, enabling man to draw from it the principles needed in order 'to till it and keep it' (Gen 2:15).

Pope Francis therefore concludes that "The entire material universe speaks of God's love, his boundless affection for us. Soil, water, mountains: everything is, as it were, a caress of God" (LS, no. 84).

Religion and theology add that beyond the physical needs, the created universe serves spiritual and liturgical purposes as well.

In brief, creation is good and serves a twin purpose: God's glory and provides for what God has made. This is indeed a beautiful world and work of a master artist. This is entrusted for man to promote – not compromise – the ability of creation to reveal God and ensure the ability of creation to provide for humans now and in the future. The Holy Father, in consonance with his immediate predecessors, accuses human beings for being the human predators of God's creation.

African Studies

The African experience in the last three to four hundred years shows a history of rapid and unrestrained disintegration of community. Views from African studies show too, that environmental degradation due to human activities is a clear indication of flight from the African heritages of communion and commensality. The pain of the human trade followed by the partitioning of Africa is a glaring indicator. This flight gathered momentum in post-independent Africa. At stake are the enthronement, entrenching and propagation of individualism and relativism over and above communalism that was prevalent in traditional African societies. This is evident in the present use of forest resources which has resulted in biodiversity loss. In such instances, according to LS, natural habitats are destroyed (cf. LS no. 39) and the consequences are climate change and global warming. This has devastating effects for Africa.

Mbiti (1969), Magesa (2001), Metuh (1987), Ejizu, to mention but a few, beyond agreeing that Africans live in communities, all attest to the inherent aversion of living isolated life among Africans and explain that for Africans, belonging is the key to existence (Ogbonnaya, 1998). Chidili's work, *Pedagogy of Human Dignity Through the Vision of Mercy* Amba Oduyoye, defines the community as the cultural institution that shapes and very often determines the

becoming of the human person. It is also a metaphysical reality. Nwachukwu (2011) adds that

A study of the structure, origin and design of the universe, particularly by African scholars, reveals the image of a world that is at the same time a universe and a web of varieties. They speak of a universe as cosmos where all things- atomic, sub-atomic, organic and inorganic, human and sub-human, earth, moon, sun, stars, galaxies – all things manifest amazing order, rationality and relationality.

Destroying the habitat in Africa means more than cutting down trees or destroying the ecosystem. It is a puncturing of a web that is so dear to African life. It involves a disintegration of cultural elements. For example, with colonization, indigenous spiritual ecology was historically replaced by an imposed Western belief that land and the environment are commodities to be used and exploited, with exploitation of natural resources in the name of socio-economic evolution. This perspective "... tended to remove any spiritual value of the land, with regard only given for economic value, and this served to further distance communities from intimate relationships with their environments" (Ritskes, Eric. 2012), often with "devastating consequences for indigenous people and nature around the world" (Joseph Murphy, Oct. 2009, and Charlotte Šunde, Oct 2006).

Deforestation, an outcome of the human use and the non-renewability of the forest and its resources, illustrates this decomposition. Nzeh et al (2015) attests that deforestation is a result of the failure and collapse of the communitarian system in Africa. The cause is quite often human greed (Paul F Knitter and Mussafar Chandra, *Subverting Greed*, 2002). The movie, *The Gods Must Be Crazy II* (written and directed by Jamie Uys, 1989), illustrates this. Xixo, around whom the story revolves, pleads with an animal before killing it – for need

(hunger), not greed – fraternal consideration for other creatures is portrayed.

The way we see the world shapes the way we treat it. If a mountain is a deity, not a pile of ore; if a river is one of the veins of the land, not potential irrigation water; if a forest is a sacred grove, not timber; if other species are biological kin, not resources; or if the planet is our mother, not an opportunity – then we will treat each other with greater respect. Thus is the challenge, to look at the world from a different perspective (David Suzuki, cited in *SPIRITUAL ECOLOGY*, en.wiki.org/spiritual-ecology).

So have Africans conceived their forests, and indeed, the environment and all it contains. Here lies the basis for an environmental ethic guiding their use of the environment and its resources.

Forests and their resources are among the five topmost valuable natural resources and assets of the world, with high economic, social and environmental importance (Ogboi, 2011). They are hugely important for life on earth. The Igbo regard them as assets, as aspects of *ala*, which could be farmed. They also regard them as repositories of medicinal drugs. Both their waters/streams and trees are attached spiritual importance. The evil forests played disciplinary roles, in spite of dearth of any possible moral justification of the practice based on today's standards. Other usages abound. The destruction of a forest is therefore an unwholesome practice which breaches the harmony and communion of the various "populations" of the various ecosystems (*uwa*). This indicates a flight from our heritage. It spells doom, not only for humankind, but for the rest of the world. Though this "earth centred" ecology borders often upon neo-paganism, it is a point of contact between African life and Christian ecology and anthropology.

Environmental Sin

A forest is more than just a collection of trees. It is more of a complex interaction of trees (vegetation) and animals (insects, birds and water life) with their abiotic environment such as water, air, soil and rock types existing in them (Enviropol, 2014). Hence, they are

... made up of a wide variety of trees that support a massive range of life forms. Quite apart from trees, forests also include the soils that support the trees, the water bodies that run through them and even the atmosphere (air) around them (eschooltoday, 2010).

Tropical rainforests, for instance, located near the equator and marked by all year round high temperatures, abundant rainfall with hugely dense, lush forest with canopies preventing sunlight from getting to the floor of the forest, are the largest types of forests. They are described as "A vital storehouse of biodiversity, sustaining millions of different animals, birds, algae and fish species" (Eschooltoday, 2010).

Forests

- house 70% of earth's algae, animals and plants,
- serve a crucial role in the water cycle by returning water vapor back into the atmosphere,
- keep forest soil moist by blocking the sun, and most importantly,
- absorb the greenhouse gases that fuel global warming (Kamran Shafqat, 2016).

Thus it serves also as one of the physical environments (one of the abiotic factors) with which these forms of life (biotic factors) interact and depend for their food and energy. Without these forests, the biotic factors perish. Forests and their ecosystems add spiritual value to human life by providing them with deeper spiritual enrichment and cognitive development:

The wonder and breathtaking properties of healthy ecosystems has recreational effects, as well as aesthetic values to us. From land the remotest places on earth to the deepest places in the oceans, there are millions of life forms that function in harmony, and provide humans with meditative and healing benefits (Enviropol, 2014).

This is essential for understanding mankind's role and relationship with the environment (Martino, 2008). It is at the root of understanding humanity's responsible role in the universe. Benedict XVI compares the universe with the home in which the person plays a principal role. The text writes among other things:

... for the human family, this home is the earth, the environment that God the Creator has given us to inhabit with creativity and responsibility. We need to care for the environment: it has been entrusted to men and women to be protected and cultivated with responsible freedom, with the good of all as a constant guiding criterion" (n. 7, L'Osservatore Romano English Edition [ORE], 19/26 December 2007, p. 8).

Its misconception, we may surmise with Martino (2008), inclines the individual to see everything in relation to his or her personal needs and the meeting of those needs, no matter the cost. This misconception ruptures mankind's relationship with the environment and the rest of created things and stands behind the evident massive exploitation and abuse of those gifts. This is a deviation, a sin.

Ecological or environmental sin therefore refers to the irresponsible use and abuse of the earth and its resources by human beings. It is the setting aside of God's providential care in order to give attention to human autonomy. In that circumstance, mankind places self-interest above the love of God and neighbour. According to Benedict XVI, "If

the relationship with God is placed aside, nature is stripped of its profound meaning and impoverished" (Benedict XVI, Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2005). In his Message for the World Day of Peace of January 1, 1990, nu 5, Pope John Paul II warns:

When man turns his back on the Creator's plan, he provokes a disorder which has inevitable repercussions on the rest of the created order. If man is not at peace with God, then earth itself cannot be at peace: 'Therefore the land mourns and all who dwell in it languish, and also the beasts of the field and the birds of the air and even the fish of the sea are taken away' (Hos 4:3).

No other epoch has witnessed the rapidity at which this earth, the sole web of life, is run down as this present age. Pressure on the environment due to human need/greed and the non-renewal of exploited resources led the earth to the present state of depletion so much mentioned across the globe. Such treatments have so greatly impacted on the environment that the world as a whole is witnessing so much changes today in the forms of global warming, climate change, and destabilization of the world's ecosystems. Scientists, environmentalists, and ecologists, tell us that these changes harm the environment, cause social tension, and threaten world peace, the continuity of the earth and the various life forms it supports. As the environment contributes a lot to human and non-human life on earth, its destruction is a major attack on all life forms on earth.

So far, information from various fields of experience and study show a world in great peril. In Octogesima Adveniens (1971), His Holiness, Pope Paul VI advised against exploitative human activities that risk rocking the boat of creation. He said:

Man is suddenly becoming aware that by an ill-considered exploitation of nature he risks destroying it and becoming in

his turn the victim of this degradation. Not only is the material environment becoming a permanent menace - pollution and refuse, new illness and absolute destructive capacity - but the human framework is no longer under man's control, thus creating an environment for tomorrow which may well be intolerable. This is a wide-ranging social problem which concerns the entire human family (no. 21).

Theological anthropology accuses mankind's predatory lifestyle and manner of governance of the earth as the root cause of the problem. John Paul II, in his Message for the World Day of Peace (1990): "In many parts of the world society is given to instant gratification and consumerism while remaining indifferent to the damage which these cause.... the seriousness of the ecological issue lays bare the depth of man's moral crisis. If an appreciation of the value of the human person and of human life is lacking, we will also lose interest in others and in the earth itself". While this indicates the consequences of the sin of Adam, it shows too that men and women today have created their own autonomy from God, taking after the old Adam:

When man turns his back on the Creator's plan, he provokes a disorder which has inevitable repercussions on the rest of the created order. If man is not at peace with God, then earth itself cannot be at peace: 'Therefore the land mourns and all who dwell in it languish, and also the beasts of the field and the birds of the air and even the fish of the sea are taken away' (Hos 4:3). (John Paul II, 1990. no. 5).

Everything that exists belongs to God, who has entrusted it to man, albeit not for his arbitrary use. Once man, instead of acting as God's co-worker, sets himself up in place of God, he ends up provoking a rebellion on the part of nature, 'which is more tyrannized than governed by him' (Benedict XVI, World Day of Peace, 2010. no. 6). Benedict XVI, in another text adds:

The way humanity treats the environment influences the way it treats itself, and vice versa. This invites contemporary society to a serious review of its life-style, which, in many parts of the world, is prone to hedonism and consumerism, regardless of their harmful consequences. . . . Every violation of solidarity and civic friendship harms the environment, just as environmental deterioration in turn upsets relations in society. Nature, especially in our time, is so integrated into the dynamics of society and culture that by now it hardly constitutes an independent variable" (Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, no. 51).

Yet, evidences from the sciences, on some impacts of human activities on environmental and ecological crisis, an obvious conclusion can be drawn: arbitrary use of the earth (mortal wound) and complacency over damaging effects (deaf ears to the earth's cries). In his dialectic, Dussel assertively states that the human species has done this (Enrique Dussel, 1988). In this situation then, men and women have lost control of the earth because they lost vision of what they are, who they are, where they are and why they are here on earth.

Our mistreatment of the natural world diminishes our own dignity and sacredness, not only because we are destroying resources that future generations of humans need, but because we are engaging in actions that contradict what it means to be human (USCCB, 1991).

Environmental crises impact on man's continued existence, essence (governance of the earth) and the overall destiny of creation (restoration in Christ Jesus, Eph 1: 10). It shows that man has sinned. Sin is the destruction of the work of God. By destroying the environment, mankind subjects to annihilation the locus of human history, of humanity, of the incarnation. This is the fuller meaning of

the fall of Adam (Dussel, 1988). In consequence, nature is mortally wounded and yet subjected to the status of those whose voices have been muffled by human overlords, hence the cries of the earth.

A Call for Ecological Conversion and the Invitation of Christ: the Mercy Door

James Gustave Speth could only discover after thirty years that “good science” alone could not address biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse and climate change. He had to return to the human person, the cause and the complainant of ecological crisis (Crockett, Daniel, Huffinton Post 2014). Unfortunately, this eludes the expertise of the natural and physical, even the environmental sciences. Not even psychology can arrest the contents of the human heart or move it to metanoia. Empirical and statistical approaches are not enough. The seat of all evil is the human heart. Speth could have started with the human heart.

Environmental sin, environmental irresponsibility, as any other type of sin, indicates the overall moral and spiritual decay and lethargy in today’s societies. This is a follow up from that estranged relationship between man and God. Exploitation is directly opposed to the true understanding of the relationship between man, God and creation. The consequence has been:

Not only is the material environment becoming a permanent menace – pollution and refuse, new illness and absolute destructive capacity – but the human framework is no longer under man's control, thus creating an environment for tomorrow which may well be intolerable (Pope Paul VI, 1971. Octogesima Adveniens, n. 21).

As Pope Francis points out, the care for the earth is necessarily bound together with our care of one another, especially the poor. This interdependency extends from the deep respect due every human person to all living beings and to the earth where we make our home (cf LS, no. 84). So also does any affliction on the earth or the human persons. This resounds the teachings of his immediate predecessors, especially, the post Vatican II Popes beginning with Paul VI. For instance, in his message for the 1990 World Peace Day, "Peace with God, Peace with All of Creation", John Paul II points out that war and the nuclear-arms race are not the only threats to world peace. It is threatened also "by the plundering of natural resources and by a progressive decline in the quality of life" (no. 1). Benedict XVI followed suit by remarking that environmental degradation is "a wide-ranging social problem which concerns the entire human family" (2010. Message for the World Day of Peace, "If You Want to Cultivate Peace, Protect Creation, no. 3). Regarding this rupture in the relationship between human activity and the whole of creation, John Paul II's (1990, no. 5) message says:

When man turns his back on the Creator's plan, he provokes a disorder which has inevitable repercussions on the rest of the created order. If man is not at peace with God, then earth itself cannot be at peace: "Therefore the land mourns and all who dwell in it languish, and also the beasts of the field and the birds of the air and even the fish of the sea are taken away" (*Hos* 4:3).

Thus, today's environmental crisis is a consequence of the lack of respect for life and a sign of the moral crisis which characterizes present day societies and which has brought about the lack of respect for life (Nos. 7; 5, 13 and 15). To address it, he even proposed recourse to a new worldview in respect to the environment which would be morally coherent (Peace with God, Peace with All of Creation, no. 2). This can only be achieved a sincere pursuit of true

peace which can only be achieved where there is a deep respect for the integrity of creation. John Paul drew inference from St Francis of Assisi:

The poor man of Assisi gives us striking witness that when we are at peace with God we are better able to devote ourselves to building up that peace with all creation which is inseparable from peace among all peoples (Message, no. 16).

Pope Francis takes off from here by making a clarion call to all mankind to turn to these new perceptions in order to take on responsibility for a destiny which is shared by all; to a conversion of heart where mankind becomes a friend to these creatures; to an ecological conversion. This guarantees a comprehensive understanding of the meaning and mission of the Holy Year of Mercy. This is the basic mission which Christ entrusted to his apostles. He himself, the eternal Word, became for us, as the Divine Mercy incarnate, the visible sign of God's mercy. The Holy Father, therefore, as the Vicar of Christ on earth, fulfils this duty by calling on the world to conversion of heart and by reminding men and women of our time of the need to show mercy, if this and future generations really desire sustainable peace and development. The church has no other mission other than to bring the mercy of God to bear on all generations and on all creatures, being herself the visible sign and instrument of God's mercy for our time. We make bold to say here, like Benedict XVI, if the world really wants mercy, it should show mercy and if we want to cultivate peace, we should protect creation.

Conclusion

This call to conversion is another way of asking everyone to return to the original mission of caring for our common home. to the path of life in Christ Jesus who is the "Way, the Truth and the Life" (John

14:6) and “the gate” of “the sheepfold” (John 10:7). According to St Maximus the Confessor, this was the same mission of Adam whose fall caused God’s creation to scatter. The special character of the mercy which the Church is called to offer is therefore made clearer in the rite of opening of the Holy Door. According to the Holy Father, “the Holy Door will become a Door of Mercy through which anyone who enters will experience the love of God who consoles, pardons, and instills hope” (MV, no. 3). The opening of doors shows the openness of God’s mercy to all (Veronica Arntz, 2015). “By crossing the threshold of the Holy Door, we will find the strength to embrace God’s mercy and dedicate ourselves to being merciful with others as the Father has been with us” (MV, no. 14). That door is Christ, who by undoing the division caused by Adam’s sin, becomes the door through which scattered creation would access the reconciling mercy of God. As he mounted the cross, he lifted nature (wood) to himself (his humanity) and offered up all in sacrifice (his death) to God. He invites all to return to the gate of the sheepfold of the entire flock of where, as the Good Shepherd, he leads his flock in harmony; where mankind, as priest of creation, rather than exploit, is called to enhance the whole “church of creation” in a symphony where members (every creature) jointly form a choir, singing in harmony the alleluia song of God’s glory. Christ had achieved the reconciliation of the created with the Uncreated and restored all things once more to the path of their eternal destiny, communion with God (cf. Eph 1:10; 1John 3:2). He bequeathed this redemptive work in the first place to the Twelve, then to the seventy two and finally to every person.

Let us surmise this – the twelve (representing those with the power of governance, spiritual or temporal), the seventy two (those with knowledge power, that is, special professions), and the rest is every man and woman, all alike, have the mandate to labour in the Master’s vineyard, having also received the command: “you too, go and work in my vineyard” (Matt. 20). The vineyard is the garden of creation where the attention of the vinedresser is called to the situation of the

vine. There the vinedresser must listen to the cry of the vine which is also the cry of the earth. This is the cry of a sister or a brother, according to Pope Francis, who now

... cries out to us because of the wounds we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her ... We have forgotten that we ourselves are dust of the earth (cf. Gen 2: 7); our very bodies are made up of her elements, we breathe her air and receive life and refreshment from her waters. Nothing in this world is indifferent to us (LS, n.2).

This is integral ecology, and it entails mercy in its comprehensive form. Only by taking this path can we join St Francis, in response to the invitation of the Prophet Daniel, to sing to God's glory, that beautiful song we learnt as infants:

All things bright and beautiful,
All creatures great and small,
All things wise and wonderful,
The Lord God made them all

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