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The Editorial:
The Environment: A Fundamentally Theological Subject
Mary-Sylvia NWACHUKWU, DDL

Befriending the Earth:
Towards a Doxological Approach to the Environment
Bede Uche UKWUIJE, C.S.Sp

Creation Account in Genesis 1:12:4 as a Model of Political Governance
Luke IJEZIE

The Exploitation of Nature and the Risk of Environmental Crisis
Philip IGBO, CMF

A Spirit-Based Theology of the Environment: Lessons from African and Christian Traditions
Bonaventure Ikenna UGWU, C.S.Sp

Re-Reading African Creation Stories: An Imperative for the Creation of Environmental Consciuosness
Nicholas MBOGU, CMF

The Environment: The Mirror Side of the Rapport Between God and Humanity
Emeka NWOSU, O.P.

The Other Arusha
Luke MBEFO, C.S.Sp

Reviews of Books

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THE EDITORIAL

The Environment: A Fundamentally Theological Subject
Mary Sylvia Nwachukwu, DDL

In this second volume of SIST Journal, we have chosen to discuss on of the most conversed topics of the present time, the environment. While international conferences are being held to discuss the environmental crisis and to chart possible ways towards its resolution, while the crisis catches the attention of scholars from different works of life, and while interest in it gradually becomes a touchstone for political credibility and power, we intend through this medium to propose that the subject of environment is first and foremost a theological and faith issue. This does not imply that the environmental crisis should not be a subject of discussion in socio-political fields; rather, the resolution of the crisis must not rely principally on guidelines from politics, psychology or any field of knowledge with a claim to its proper resolution. The interpretation and guideline for the resolution of the present environmental crisis needs theology because what happens to the natural world is an essentially theological question. This position is underscored most by the fact that the very first statement in the Bible concerns the environment. The notion that “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen 1:1) ‘heaven and earth’ being an inclusive designation for the earth is a statement with enormous implication for faith. The provision of an ordered and wholesome environment that is viable for life is such a topic of primary importance that it rates first among the many issues that the Bible treats. Therefore, to say that ‘environment needs theology’ implies that created nature is presently experienced as weird and as an organism in crisis. This crisis is so endemic that it has, like crime and violence, become a home topic.

Before the present environmental crises, the developing countries of the world have been subjected to serious ecological
degradation. The demeaning ecological situation of most contemporary African countries contrasts with the ancient African values and customs on which Africa had thrived till modern times. It was hoped that the Africans would stand on the toes of those ancient values and customs, and take advantage of advancements in science and technology, to make Africa a more beautiful home for its citizens.

Without ignoring the recent efforts the state governments are making towards caring for the environment in Nigeria today, the entire country has for decades experienced neglect by the federal and state governments and by political leaders of different capacities, who fail to make the environment an item in their political agenda. The landscape in many an African country is beautified by rivers of different dimensions, which if they were cared for, could qualify as tourist centers and relaxation spots for the people. As the situation is, people stop their noses when they pass or drive through some of the areas, and the populations that live around them exist unperceiving of the dangers they pose to their health. Consequently, aquatic life is put in danger and fish husbandry in such areas is out of discussion. In the cities, where the government does not make any provision for refuse dumps, the streets and side road gutters become places for refuse disposal.

As different nations, political and religious organization suffer the agitations raised by the environmental crisis, and as they search for long lasting solutions to these problems, we affirm in this volume that theology must champion the discussions because it has the authority to give guidelines and play a major role in the dialogue that cuts across national, social and religious boarders. Theology could do this through shaping people's minds and attitude towards the environment.

The basic text on which theology bases its interpretation of the present environmental dilemma is the biblical story of creation in Gen 1:12:4a. This text provides the basis for the divine origin of the created order and for the nature of the relationships that guarantees the persistence and sanity of the earth. God's creative action gave rise to the human habitat, designated in Gen 1:1 as 'the heavens and the earth': "In the beginning God created the heavens and earth". The outcome of God's action is "a place of fruitfulness, abundance, productivity, extravagance all terms summed up in the word blessing." Therefore, what stands out primarily in the creation account is a bountiful, wonderful world able to sustain all the created realities that inhabit it.

The contributors in this volume base their theological reflections on this particular text, its parts and/or on ideas that are related to it. Each concentrates on one aspect of the implications of the message of the creation story. According to Bede U. Ukwuije, praise should be the human response to the God who created a bountiful world capable of sustaining all its members. The proper human response to God's gift is overwhelming doxology expressed in a relationship of tenderness and respect to the created world and to the God-given gifts of nature. Therefore, Ukwuije argues that the environmental crisis is not merely a crisis in the natural environment; it is a spiritual crisis in the human person. It is the human inability to receive the world as gift and to perceive self as steward of that gift. This spiritual crisis is the consequence of what the author describes as 'auto-foundation'. According to the author, when human beings discover their kinship, not lordship, with other created realities, this discovery would set them free to experience the world as the glory of God.

The creation story in Gen 1:12:4a and the human commission in Gen 1:28 provide Luke Ijezie the material for a contextual reflection on the theological and sociopolitical implications of the ecological crises in the world. Ijezie reads the creation account as an act of governance; governance being the act of putting order into unruly reality. The author explains with dexterity that the text

elucidates two divine actions, viz, the divine act of creating and that of ordering of the universe. The point made here is that created nature needs to be governed and controlled for it to serve its creative purpose. Read in this way, he suggests that the divine command to human beings is best realized through effective political governance. His essay challenges individuals, communities, governments, non-governmental agencies and world bodies to confront the ecological disasters and sinister natural forces in the contemporary world through competent and responsible leadership.

The third essay, written by Philip Igbo, exposes a related aspect of the political dimension of the human-earth relationship. According to him, the created world exists as 'a network of lives woven from threads of dependence and interdependence'. In their governance of created nature, human beings need wisdom to understand the interconnections that make up the integrity of the ecosystem and which enhance its generative potentials. Therefore, an attitude of domination and triumphalism over nature and nature's exploitation for humanity's immediate needs is an environmental injustice against God's shalom, against nature and against future generations. The consequence of this act of injustice is environmental disaster. With this idea, Igbo exposes the impact of natural oil exploration on the socio-environment of the oil producing communities of the Niger Delta of Nigeria.

Environmental crisis used to be considered as the problem of the West. This is no longer so because the crisis resonates in every part of the globe, challenging and addressing peoples in their situations. The crisis is 'posing enormous challenges for Africa, and Africa must respond. In this volume, two contributors Bona Ugwu and Nicholas Mbougu proffer theological approaches that offer specific responses to the ecological problems in Africa.

Bonaventure Ugwu draws lessons from the African and Christian traditions in order to formulate a Spirit-based theology of the environment, which has roots in the African concept of the universe as religious and of the earth as spirit. The author exposes a number of theological approaches which had been proffered to respond to the needs of the environment today. These provide him with a background for presenting this new and contextualized approach. Ugwu finds support for his thesis in the theology of a modern religious thinker like Teilhard de Chardin. For the African and other cultures that have this idea of earth as spirit, this theology inculcates the spirituality which could provide a remedy to the present ecological problems as well as hope for the future of non-human realities.

Nicholas Mbougu suggests a re-reading of the African myths of origin as means of creating environmental consciousness. According to him, the most outstanding idea in most African myths of origin is the sacral quality of the material universe, which reveals its divine origin and intrinsic goodness. Since African creation myths generally do not contain the idea that human beings are God's image, and do not also contain the human commission to dominate and rule over creation, human beings therefore find themselves in a kinship relationship with nature and not above it. In the estimation of the author, these ideas nurture an attitude to nature which is sacramental, and which is an invitation to a holistic spirituality. Finally, the author draws attention to the connection between land and the preservation of life in both African and biblical traditions. With this, he shows that the degradation of land, in its different manifestations, is a moral attack on life.

The Church has contributed immensely to the ongoing discussions and search for understanding, interpretation and provision of solution to the environmental crisis. Being a matter of great importance to Christian faith, the Church Magisterium, through her social teachings, has given several teachings that articulate valid Christian response and contribution to the environmental discourse. A list of Papal documents that contain teachings on ecology could be mentioned here: the Rerum
Novarum of Pope Leo XIII, the Mater et Magistra of John XXIII, the Octogesima Adveniens of Paul VI, the Redemptoris Hominis of John Paul II, and the more recent Peace with God the Creator; Peace with all of Creation (1990) of John Paul II. References to some of these documents exist in the essays of this volume. The Popes lament human exploitation of the earth, the negative effects of scientific discoveries in the areas of industry, agriculture and medicine. They highlight especially the painful fact that where nature is violated, environmental crises are sure to erupt.

Emeka Nwosu directs attention to this treasure house of Christian tradition and theology. He went down the memory lane and culled up the insights of a second-century churchman and theologian, Irenaeus Bishop of Lyons. Nwosu affirms that Irenaeus was neither an eco-friendly theologian nor a Christian environmentalist, but his theology of creation and of the human person, he said, is a rich source for articulating the environmental questions and a basis for a Christian perspective into the problem.

In different ways, the contributions made in this second volume of AJCT confirm that the inhabitants of this world need an ecological conversion. The final paper underscores this by taking the reader to the most beautiful spot in the world: Arusha of Tanzania. The paper is a prosaic lyric over Arusha. Like the biblical poets, Luke Mbefo contemplates the glory of God reflected over the physical geography of this city. The author does not compare this city to Mount Zion, the true pole of the earth; he does not compare the beautiful mountain of this city (Mount Meru) with Mount Sinai or to the Mount of Transfiguration, and he does not compare its fauna and flora with the splendor of Solomon. No, Mbefo says, Arusha has more rights to claim the title 'city of God'. Arusha, therefore, is a land to be experienced for an ecological conversion. Its beauty and glory could dispose one to be more eco-friendly than exploitative.