

GRIEVANCE AND GROANING

A Theological Reflection on the Uprising and Tsunami

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I am aware of their sufferings" (Ex 3:7). "The whole creation has been groaning in one great act of giving birth" (Rom 8:22).

Introduction

The contagious unrest in the Middle East and the subsequent tsunami after the earthquake of 8.9 magnitude in Japan came as a surprise to many observers around the world. Yet the wind of change in the Middle East and the sweep of the tsunami water have been significant signs of the times that warrant a theological reflection on the need for a dialogical relationship with fellow human being and the earth. This relationship calls for a dialogic reverence of the human aspirations and the organic growth of the earth premised on the sacredness of human persons and the earth.

The first section of this paper will be a theological reflection on the grievances of the heart in the Middle East and groaning of the earth as indicated by the roaring waves of the tsunami in Japan. This reflection will be done in the light of the social teachings of the church and papal encyclical in the first section. A further theological reflection will be done in the second section regarding the nexus between culture and nature in the light of the papal encyclical *Caritas*

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in Veritate. What is obvious is the failure on the part of the autocratic regimes and humankind to embody and practice a “dialogic reverence” that upholds the sacredness of humankind and creation. This “dialogic reverence” will be enunciated further in the third section.

1. Grievances of the Hearts and Groaning of the Earth

1.1. Grievances of the hearts: The Middle East uprising has been reported under different labels, from grass-root democracy movements to sand storms of revolution, anti-government demonstrations/protests, democratic wave, pro-democracy demonstrations, popular movements and even rebels in the case of Libya. Most of these countries (Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain and Iran) suffer from reasonably high rate of unemployment, the highest being Egypt among the young who are under 25. Unemployment in Egypt is at 49.3 percent, Iran at 14.6 percent, Libya at 14 percent, and Yemen at 10-14 percent. At 45 percent Yemen commands a lead in the highest incidence of those living below the poverty line, with Egypt in the second place at 20 percent and Tunisia in the third at 15 percent. Yemen has the lowest per capita income of all the countries caught up in the wind of change.¹

The statistics clearly indicate that the grinding poverty, high unemployment rate, lack of access and the unfulfilled aspirations of the governed, especially among the young have occasioned the mounting grievances in the hearts of the Middle Eastern protestors. Politically the uprising signals the near or total collapse of the processes of political dialogue whence the legitimate demands of the citizens were unheeded by the ruling power. Little wonder the Egyptian protestors who are both Muslims and Christians concertedly call for democracy and constitutional reforms that guarantee greater freedom to the citizens. The young people of Cairo poured into the Tahrir Square and demanded that their aspirations for justice, freedom, peace and equality be fulfilled by the new government in the post Mubarak era.² In Libya the young people behind the unrest demanded “something that are just” such as having “a house, a better salary, a job” which the government has the resources to satisfy but failed to deliver.³ Amidst

¹See article “Arab and Middle East Uprising: A Map of the countries Affected by the Revolution” posted on 24/02/2011. [On-line] Available from <http://www.oasiscenter.eu/en/node/6784>.

²Cardinal Antonios Naguib, the Coptic Catholic Patriarch of Alexandria told reporters at the press conference that the change of government in Egypt was driven by the dreams of the young people expressing “their desires for values like justice, freedom, peace and equality,” *Herald*, Vol. 18, no. 8, March 6, 2011:1.

³A remark made by Bishop Giovanni Martinelli, the apostolic vicar of Tripoli, Libya, *Herald*, Vol. 18, no. 8, March 6, 2011:1.

such turmoil and transition, the church has advocated forms of reconciliation which allow the people to have what is due to them.⁴

The need for a just political order based on constitutional reform to bring about democratic governance has been a clarion call from the protestors. Such heartfelt aspirations find a ready resonance in the CSDC or Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church. CSDC in no. 406 clearly explains that “the Church values the democratic system in as much as it ensures the participation of citizens in making political choices, guarantees the governed the possibility both of electing and holding them accountable those who govern them, and of replacing them through peaceful means when appropriate.”⁵ In no. 408, the CSDC is emphatic that the “political authority is accountable to the people”⁶ because “those who govern have the obligation to answer to those governed” and “the obligation on the part of those elected to give an accounting of their work – which is guaranteed by respecting electoral terms – is a constitutive element of democratic representation.”⁷ More so, as affirmed in no. 394, the political authority of the State “must always be exercised within the limits of morality and on behalf of the dynamically conceived common good” which “in turn has God for its first source and final end,” according to no. 396.⁸

In a just democratic order, the elected are to “put power into practice as service” so that the elected work for the “common good, and not prestige or the gaining of personal advantages, as the true goal” of their public offices.⁹ Furthermore, “authentic democracy is possible only in a State ruled by law, and on the basis of a correct conception of the human person” wherein there persons are respected “through the creation of structures of participation and shared responsibility.”¹⁰ An authentic and just democracy calls for a consensus on certain essential values as stated in no. 407: “the dignity

4A paraphrase of Bishop Giovanni Martinelli’s comment which said that the Catholic Church, which represents a tiny minority in Libya, wanted above all a “form of reconciliation that allows the Libyan people to have what is just”: *Herald*, Vol. 18, no. 8, March 6, 2011:1.

⁵See Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2004, 229. [Henceforth referred to as CSDC]

⁶In fact, CSDC no. 384 states that, “the human person is the foundation and purpose of political life.” See CSDC, 217.

⁷CSDC, 230.

⁸CSDC, 223-4. CDSC no. 396 insists that this political order “has no existence except in God; cut off from God it must necessarily disintegrate.”

⁹CSDC, no. 410: 231.

¹⁰John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Evangelium Vitae*, 56, AAS 87 (1995) 464; cf John Paul II, Message of the 2001 Word Day of Peace, 19, AAS 93 (2001) 244; also see CDSC, no. 406:227.

of every human person, the respect of human rights, commitment to the common good as the purpose of guiding criterion for political life."¹¹ To this must be added, the independence of the judiciary, the rule of law, accountability and transparency in terms of management of the nation's resources, care for the environment, just policies for the minorities, promotion of the democratic space for civil society, freedom for the media and religious freedom.

Given the presence of cultural and religious minorities, just and democratic governance always promotes their collective rights. CSDC in no. 387 states that "minorities have the right to maintain their cultures, including their languages, and to maintain their religious beliefs, including worship services."¹² At the same time, "a minority group has the duty to promote the freedom and dignity of each one of its members and to respect the decisions of each one, even if someone were to decide to adopt the majority culture." A just political order will uphold the religious freedom of the minorities because the CSDC in no. 421 advocates that "the dignity of the person and the nature of the quest for God require that all men and women should be free from every restraint in the area of religion. Society and the State must not force a person to act against her/his conscience or prevent her/him from acting in conformity with it."¹³ Religious freedom is not a moral license to adhere to error, nor as an implicit right to error."¹⁴ In no. 422, the CSDC further states that "the right to religious freedom must be recognized in the juridical order and sanctioned as a civil right;¹⁵ nonetheless, it is not of itself just an unlimited right."¹⁶

When the government becomes dictatorial and dismissive of the demands of the governed for genuine reforms, CSDC no. 385 reminds the government of the day that the governed are not "a shapeless multitude, an inert mass to be manipulated and exploited, but a group of persons, to whom – "at her/his proper place and in her/his own way"¹⁷ – express its own political sentiments and to bring them to

¹¹ CSDC, 229.

¹²CSDC, 218-9.

¹³Second Vatican Council, Declaration *Dignitatis Humanae*, 3, AAS 58 (1966) 931-932.

¹⁴See Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2105.

¹⁵Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2108.

¹⁶CSDC, 237.

¹⁷Pius XII, Christmas Radio Message of 24 December 1944: AAS 37 (1945) 13; also see CSDC no. 385:218. Echoing the social teachings, Jean Baudrillard points out that the "*la massa*" has to be regarded "always as a potential energy, a reservoir of the social and of social energy; today a mute referent, tomorrow, when they speak up and cease to be the "silent majority," a protagonist of history... with a claim to subjecthood." See Jean Baudrillard, *In the Shadows of the silent Majorities...or the end of the social and other essays*. Trans. P. Foss, P. Patten & J. Johnston (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983) 2, 107.

bear positively on the common good.”¹⁸ The ultimate recommendation of CSDC in no. 395 is that the governed who “transfers the exercise of sovereignty to those whom it freely elects as its representative” reserves the prerogative “in replacing them when they do not fulfil their functions satisfactorily.”¹⁹

1.2. *Groaning of the earth*

The tsunami is likened to a violent outburst of an aggrieved earth that has devastated the north-eastern part of Japan, especially the central part of the town of Minami-Sanrikucho in Miyagi Prefecture. Over 20,000 people are reported missing in the earthquake and tsunami. The estimated death toll was certain to exceed 10,000 and the economic toll estimated between US\$14.5 and US\$34.6 billion. More than 215,000 are huddled in emergency shelters, 2.6 million households are left without electricity, nearly 3.2 million people are running out of gas supplies and 1.4 million people have no access to water.²⁰ The quake and its tectonic shift resulted from the “thrust faulting” when a colossal earthquake provided a sudden jolt to the Pacific plate which accelerated its push under a far western wedge of the North America plate which is already doing so at the rate of about 83mm per year.²¹ This was the worst tsunami after the 2004 Aceh tsunami that was caused by a 9.1 magnitude earthquake that claimed an estimated of 228,000 lives.

The impact of profit-driven development and economics on the ecological wellbeing of planet earth is not without its consequences, albeit unforeseen, especially in terms of a rupture of the harmonious relationship between the earth and humankind. The intensity of such rupture alerted Pope Benedict XVI to call for “*further and deeper reflection on the meaning of the economy and its goals*, as well as a profound and far-sighted revision of the current model of development, so as to correct its dysfunctions and deviations. This is demanded, in any case, by the earth’s state of ecological health; above all it is required by the cultural and moral crisis of humankind, the symptoms of which have been evident for some time all over the world.”²² There is no denying that the current rupture is occasioned by what the Pope alluded to as an exploitative worldview that the world and humans are viewed “as the result of mere chance or evolutionary determinism” that our sense of responsibility wane markedly to the extent that nature is considered “a heap of scattered refuse” because humankind has consistently failed

¹⁸See CSDC, 218.

¹⁹CSDC, 223.

²⁰“Japan Reels,” *The Sun*, March 15, 2011, 1-2.

²¹*The Star*, 14 March, 2011: 1, W35

²²See Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Caritas in Veritate*, Section 4, no. 48.

miserably to decipher what the Pope explains as a “grammar” in nature which “sets forth ends and criteria for its wise use, not its reckless exploitation.”²³

The exercise of global responsible stewardship is expressed with urgency in the papal encyclical. The Pope urges that competent authorities

make every effort to ensure that the economic and social costs of using up shared environmental resources are recognized with transparency and fully borne by those who incur them, not by other peoples or future generations: the protection of the environment, of resources and of the climate obliges all international leaders to act jointly and to show a readiness to work in good faith, respecting the law and promoting solidarity with the weakest regions of the planet.²⁴

He hastens to add that “one of the greatest challenges facing the economy is to achieve the most efficient use — not abuse — of natural resources, based on a realization that the notion of “efficiency” is not value-free.”²⁵

Pope Benedict calls for the need for greater intergenerational eco-sensitivity by beholding the environment as “God’s gift to everyone and in our use of it we have a responsibility towards the poor, towards future generations and towards humanity as a whole.”²⁶ Again the Pope reiterated the involvement of the young in facing these ruptures: “if they are to be faced adequately, then everyone must responsibly recognize the impact they will have on future generations, particularly on the many young people in the poorer nations, who “ask to assume their active part in the construction of a better world.”²⁷ This is based on a fundamental conviction that “on this earth there is room for everyone: here the entire human family must find the resources to live with dignity, through the help of nature itself— God’s gift to his children — and through hard work and creativity.”²⁸

In the same breath, the Pope calls for a contemplative attitude in which the believer recognizes in nature “the wonderful result of God’s creative activity, which we may use responsibly to satisfy our legitimate needs, material or otherwise, while respecting the intrinsic balance of creation.” Moreover, nature is “a gift of the Creator who

²³Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, Section 4, no. 48.

²⁴Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, Section 4, no. 50.

²⁵Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, Section 4, no. 50.

²⁶Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, Section 4, no. 50.

²⁷Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, Section 4, no. 51.

²⁸Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, Section 4, no. 51.

has given it an inbuilt order, enabling wo/man to draw from it the principles needed in order “to till it and keep it” (Gen 2:15).²⁹

2. Ecology as Nexus between Culture and Nature

The link between the uprising and the tsunami is explained by the concept “ecology” used in the papal encyclical. In citing the example of desertification and human impoverishment, the Pope explains the nexus between culture and nature.

Desertification and the decline in productivity in some agricultural areas are also the result of impoverishment and underdevelopment among their inhabitants. When incentives are offered for their economic and cultural development, nature itself is protected. The hoarding of resources, especially water, can generate serious conflicts among the peoples involved.³⁰

The link between the uprising and tsunami is found in the pope’s explanation on the nexus between nature and culture. The pope remarks that “nature, especially in our time, is so integrated into the dynamics of society and culture that by now it hardly constitutes an independent variable.” In carrying through his argument, the Pope believes that “every violation of solidarity and civic friendship harms the environment, just as environmental deterioration in turn upsets relations in society”³¹ and conversely “the deterioration of nature is in fact closely connected to the culture that shapes human coexistence: *when “human ecology” is respected within society, environmental ecology also benefits.*”³²

Second, the link between the uprising and tsunami is found in the pope’s insight of the “indivisible book of nature.”

The book of nature is one and indivisible: it takes in not only the environment but also life, sexuality, marriage, the family, social relations: in a word, integral human development. Our duties towards the environment are linked to our duties towards the human person, considered in her/himself and in relation to others. It would be wrong to uphold one set of duties while trampling on the other. Herein lies a grave contradiction in our mentality and practice today: one which demeans the person, disrupts the environment and damages society.³³

In this indivisible nexus between culture and nature, what is needed is a reaffirmation of that “*covenant between human beings and the environment, which should mirror the creative love of God, from whom we come and towards whom we are journeying.*”³⁴

²⁹Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, Section 4, no. 51. Section 4, no. 50. Emphasis is mine.

³⁰Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, Section 4, no. 51.

³¹Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, Section 4, no. 51.

³²Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, Section 4, no. 51.

³³Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, Section 4, no. 51.

³⁴Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, Section 4, no. 51.

3. A Civilization of “Dialogic Reverence”

The grievances of human hearts and the groaning of the earth calls for the need to inculcate a sense of “dialogic reverence” to be rendered to the Lord of Creation and humankind whose omnipresence in humankind and creation has sacralized the earth and humankind. The sacredness of human beings impinges on the government, civil and societal leaders to promote a civilization of “dialogic reverence” that constitutes the moral foundation of a just and democratic governance.

“Dialogic reverence” has its anthropological and theological bases in the dialogic relationship amongst humankind. In this relationship, the Other is to be regarded “as our ‘neighbour,’ ‘a helper’ (cf. Gen.2:18-20), to be made a sharer, on par with ourselves, in the banquet of life to which all are equally invited by God.”³⁵ The Other is “not only a human being with her or his own rights and a fundamental equality with everybody else, but becomes the image of God the Father, redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ and placed under the permanent action of the Holy Spirit.”³⁶ The Other is truly an “earthen vessel” (2 Cor4:7), suffused with God’s omnipresence and rightly so, the temple of God’s indwelling Spirit (1 Cor 6:9). This “dialogic reverence” calls for a conscientious option for dialogic relationship with others rather than barbarity that violates the dignity of the other.³⁷

When any political authority fails to respond adequately to the genuine aspirations of the human hearts, it has failed to render the “dialogic reverence” due to the Other and ultimately to God. Hence the measure by which dialogic irreverence is meted out to the citizens through statist violence is equally the measure by which political authority gradually de-legitimizes itself, divests itself of its moral authority and incapacitates its ability to govern justly.

In relation to the earth, “dialogic reverence” has its theological basis in the covenant which God has entered with humankind through Noah (Gen 9:12-17). Henceforth, humankind is exhorted to live in harmony with God’s creation which entails a dialogic relationship in which the embodiment and manifestation of dialogic reverence to all

³⁵See John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, no. 30.

³⁶John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, no. 30.

³⁷Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, President of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, made a remark “Between dialogue or barbarity, we choose dialogue” on the occasion of the memorial mass in Rome on March 6, 2011, for Shahbaz Bhatti, Pakistan’s Catholic minister for religious minorities who was assassinated by Muslim extremists in Islamabad, Pakistan on Mar 2, 2011.

of God's creation is of paramount importance for the sustaining the wellbeing of environmental ecology. This dialogic reverence for creation is akin to the description of a group of scientists, including 32 Nobel-Prize-winners, in a petition sent to a meeting of spiritual leaders from 83 countries. With frankness and clarity, they acknowledge that "as scientists, many of us have had profound experiences of awe and reverence before the universe. We understand that what is regarded as sacred is more likely to be treated with care and respect."³⁸

The rupture of this dialogic relationship between the earth and humankind results in a disharmony and dissonance that manifest its ugliness in the lamentable destruction and untimely death in the aftermath of natural disasters. In this uncalled-for suffering, humankind is confronted with the naked truth about the ultimate meaning of existence on our planet earth. May this time of "questioning" bring about the necessary conversion that liberates many hearts from that dialogic irreverence that desecrates God's creation premised on a sacrilegious and exploitative relationship with the earth.³⁹

Conclusion

The grievance of the hearts and the groaning of the earth are theological moments when God "bursts into" human consciousness with the profound truths about who we are to one another and what the earth is to humankind. When the basic aspirations of the hearts are left unheeded and unfulfilled, the power of uprising is unleashed that breaks down cultural and religious barriers and topples autocracy, paving the way for just democratic governance. In an aggrieved planet that groans and moans in the aches of birth pang, the ruptures between the humankind and our planet earth need to be harmonized to ensure the sustainability of the organic relationship between humankind and the earth. Building a civilization of "dialogic reverence" amongst humankind and between humankind and creation is becoming an urgent and non-negotiable basis for the just governance of the citizens and greater harmony of life on our planetary home earth.

³⁸John Moore, SJ "Caritas in Veritate: An Ecological Perspective," JCTR Bulletin, 85 (2010) 25.

³⁹In fact, O' Murchu suggests that "it is not about life on earth, but about the life that is earth" and this life "is affected, for weal and for woe, by the quality of our respect for its inherent processes and our willingness to interact (relate to) all life forms in a gentle, non-exploitative, cooperative manner." See Diarmuid O'Murchu, *Quantum Theology: Spiritual Implications of the New Physics*, New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2004, 110, 38.