

ECOLOGICAL CONCERNS IN CHRISTIAN TRADITIONS: REFLECTIONS ON *LAUDATO SÍ*

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Abstract

All Christians believe that God has created the world and God found it good. God expects us to protect and maintain Nature and to be responsible in the use of natural resources and other living beings. The mother earth today is heavily exploited and her existence is constantly threatened. Many of the natural calamities are the result of human irresponsibility, selfishness and greed. Keeping this in mind, in his recent encyclical *Laudato Sí*, Pope Francis invites all of us for a true conversion and ecological approach based on the reality of our society.

This article with its limitation, aims to show us mainly the ecological concerns in Christian traditions and to create ecological awareness among Christians. We are also aware of similar or deeper ecological concerns in other religious traditions as well. In the pluri-religious context of Asia our dialogue of life as well as our interreligious dialogue needs a new direction towards 'Ecological Concerns in all the Religious Traditions' in order to conscientize ourselves and others so that we all grow more and more in communion with mother earth and lead a life of harmony.

Keywords: Ecological Degradation, Environment and Mysticism, Ecology in India, Integral Ecology, Justice, *Laudato Sí*, Option for the Poor

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1. Introduction

In the post modern era one of the important concerns is that for the environment, because the earth is under a great threat. Earth preserves all creatures. At the same time, all creatures need to take responsibility of preserving the earth from all negative and evil forces. The earth and the humans are inter-dependent. One without the other cannot exist. Today there are many ecological issues that wait for answers from us humans. Keeping all these in mind, Pope Francis in his Encyclical *Laudato Sí* (LS) invites all the peoples of all nations to protect the sister Earth:

This sister now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her. We have come to see ourselves as her lords and masters, entitled to plunder her at will. The violence present in our hearts, wounded by sin, is also reflected in the symptoms of sickness evident in the soil, in the water, in the air and in all forms of life (LS, 2).

Moreover, "...this Encyclical welcomes dialogue with everyone so that together we can seek paths of liberation..." (LS, 64).

Although we know that there are many ecological concerns expressed by different religions, ideologies and people's movements with different approaches to nature and the world, here I limit myself to the ecological concerns expressed in Christian Traditions. I begin with the experience of both the ecological degradation in India and in the world. This leads my search further to analyse the situation and seek for answers from the ecological concerns in Christian traditions.

2. Ecological Degradation in India

On February 14, 2013, *Times of India* shared with us a frightening information: "Air Pollution, A Top Killer in India": "India could be staring at a public health nightmare caused by air pollution just like China. It is the fifth leading cause of death in India, with about 620,000 premature deaths, the Centre for Science and Environment's (CSE) analysis has shown."¹ Moreover "in 2014, the World Health Organization measured air quality levels in 1,600 cities around the world, and the Indian capital city of New Delhi was found to have the highest concentration of particulate matter smaller than 2.5 micrometers, also called PM2.5."² Air pollution is caused by industrial

¹Times of India, "Air Pollution, A Top Killer in India," *Times of India*, 14.02.2013, pages 1 and 11.

²Information from WHO: <http://money.cnn.com/2015/04/14/news/economy/india-delhi-air-pollution/>

and vehicular pollution and dumping and burning of waste materials and other industrial products.

Today we hear and speak of national economic development. Are the national development programmes inclusive or exclusive is our question. Whenever a development programme is exclusive, it is anti-nature and anti-poor. The reason is that such development programmes neither include the poor in the decision making process nor they need the poor. The poor and their socio, economic and political life is not at all taken into consideration in the planning of such programmes.

The ecological balance and its relation with man and woman is "a fundamental one."³ Where there is no social justice there is also no ecological justice.⁴ Many a time the exploitation of nature is an injustice directly done to the poor and the oppressed. Often many projects in villages and cities are planned by the politicians and the rich industrialists to replace the poor and oppressed from the place of natural environment in which they live. Such projects not only alienate the poor and the oppressed from nature but also deprive them of their rights to existence where they choose to live. Therefore it is said that any project that affects the nature, affects the poor and the oppressed. The poor and the oppressed have a covenantal existence with the nature. In the third world, the exploiters of nature are not only the local rich and powerful from the homelands, but also the rich and powerful in the first world.⁵

A number of projects in India, such as Sardar Sarovar dam, creation of Special Economic Zones, Hydro-electric projects, Land acquiring by the Governments and Koodankulam atomic power plant, the developmental plans of our governments do not consider the welfare of the local people. These developmental plans become causes of social injustice because the land and water sources of the nations are given in the hands of a few, depriving the life sources and rights of many. Obviously, the affected people lose faith in their leaders. Ambedkar, the mahatma of Social Change, told 81 years before that people won't accept the economic growth if it has to be achieved by oppressing and destroying the poor, fisher folk, Adivasi and Dalits.⁶

³Gaudencio B. Rosales, C.G. Arevalo, ed., *For All the Peoples of Asia*, Quezon City: Claretion Publication, 1992, 320, No. 13. (Hereafter Rosales).

⁴Jürgen Moltmann, *Who is Christ for us Today?* Germany: Chr. KAISER, 1994, 93: "Violence against the poor confirms the violence against the weak nature. Where there is no social justice, there is no ecological justice as well."

⁵Paul Knitter, *Jesus and the Other Names*, Oxford, 1996, 11.

⁶Jeevan Kumar, "Quest for Social Justice," in *Ambedkar and Social Justice*, ed., Shashi S.S. Vol. I, New Delhi: Veerendra Printers, 1992, 269.

That the poor and the Dalits are not having social justice is the fundamental reason for the chaotic situation that is prevalent in India. Only the peace that is built upon social justice would last forever and support and sustain Nature.

Hence we need to discern the signs of the time and need to learn from them so that in future we and all our socio-political leaders plan all projects to be inclusive, where the poor and the oppressed have a rightful place in the process of decision making. Every development programme has to be for the development of the poor and the oppressed as well as for the support and sustenance of Nature.

3. Global Experience of Ecological Degradation

People in all continents pollute air, water, light, earth and space. The humans dump everything either into the sea or on the mountain top. Dangerous materials having radioactive waves are disposed and such materials remain for thousands of years, threatening human life. The hole in the ozone layer becomes bigger and bigger and the sun rays and the sun particles which disturb our human life, bring us ill-health and suffering.

In some places, for example Brazil, industrialists cut thousands of trees for business, and the temperature of the atmosphere goes up. In some areas there are strong winds, sudden water-flow in the hills which take away everything. The Glaciers are melting and the water level in the seas and oceans rise.

At the Kyoto Protocol to the UNFCCC (the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change), many nations of the world came together in Japan, and signed the treaty on 11 December 1997, "with the goal of achieving the "stabilization of greenhouse gas concentration in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system."⁷ Though the time of agreement was over in 2012, many countries have not renewed their commitment for the second term. This is due to a craze for development of their countries, discarding common good. Countries like USA (which never became a member to the protocol) do not bother about this problem.⁸ Canada withdrew from the protocol from 2012, followed by countries like Japan, New Zealand, Russia, and they have not renewed their contract again.⁹ This will have a serious impact on the world climate in future.

⁷http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kyoto_Protocol

⁸http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kyoto_Protocol

⁹http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kyoto_Protocol

Another point to remember is the exploitation of the poor and developing nations by the rich. To produce bio-petrol for the rich countries, the farmers in Africa are forced to cultivate wheat in Africa. Another example is that the farmers are asked to plant the cotton wool in thousands of acres and in the process the land becomes infertile and useless.¹⁰ All these cause ecological imbalances in the world. Pope Francis elaborately discusses the cry of the suffering earth in the encyclical (No. 15-112).

4. Ecological Concerns in the Christian Tradition

4.1. Ecological Concerns in the Early Christian Tradition

When we search for ecological concerns in the early Christian tradition, we find a few inspiring personalities. The Shepherd of Hermes invited Christians for repentance and taught them to live friendly with nature. Antony the Great is the father of monastic life. He was very friendly with the nature and animals. His opponents put him once among the wild animals, so that the wild animals might eat him up. But to their great surprise he was living and speaking joyfully with the wild animals. He wanted to use the natural caves as dwelling places for the monks, which was a decision against the desire of his disciples.

In the same way Paul of Thebes¹¹ followed the ways of Antony the Great, and loved and lived in the midst of nature. It is said that the birds brought him food to eat. Basil the Great was against all forms of hoarding.¹² He preached that common sharing is the universal destination of all creatures. Augustine of Hippo preached that money is the root cause of all evils.¹³ He spoke against the rich in buying and selling of creatures as commodities. He has alluded indirectly to Globalization and its negative effects already in his time. John Chrysostom said that the private properties are the root causes of all

¹⁰<http://www.thecropsite.com/articles/1771/environmental-impacts-of-biofuels/>. One of the major reasons for producing biofuels is to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and to mitigate the effects of global warming produced by fossil fuels. The FAO warns that nitrous oxide that is released from fertilisers that might be put on the ground to help the crops grow will have 300 times more global warming effect than carbon dioxide. See more at: <http://www.thecropsite.com/articles/1771/environmental-impacts-of-biofuels/#sthash.yrSPqGc5.dpuf>

¹¹https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_of_Thebes

¹²<https://bekkos.wordpress.com/2009/10/08/st-basil-on-stealing-from-the-poor/>

¹³<http://www.catholiceducation.org/en/culture/catholic-contributions/self-love-and-the-sin-of-avarice.html>: "Augustine explains this in clear terms: You should not any further than the root of the issue. Take care that you believe in the unsurpassable truth of the saying that the root of all evils is greed (1 Tim. 6:10), that is, wanting to have more than enough."

evils. According to him, the creation and all its fruits are meant for all and not for a few.¹⁴

Thus the Fathers and great saints of the early Church spoke of common good, common ownership, common welfare and wellbeing of all humans in such a way that the humans were friendly with nature and took responsibility of protecting and sustaining it. Their world views are a source of information and inspiration to men and women today in the modern world to feel one with the nature and preserve it.

4.2. Prophetic Voice of St Giles

Monica Ehrlich¹⁵ of the University of Virginia made an in-depth study of St. Giles who lived in the seventh-century. He loved the land and creatures. He was an environmentalist in his thinking and living. His analysis of the environmental crisis is an eye opener and a prophetic revelation to the modern world. He rightly points out that one of the main reasons for eco-crisis is the gluttony of the wealthy. He was an exemplar, "... mostly for his critique of aristocratic land use, hunting, and feudal cultures of consumption. This critique elevated agriculture over hunting as well as simple living over the banquet/feasting culture."¹⁶ Thus he challenged the rich prophetically and invites them to share with the have-nots. Moreover, "Giles saw the land with an environmental ethic. This allowed him to use it to, for instance, build hospitals for the poor rather than advance his own material wealth."¹⁷ This is what the Gospel of Jesus speaks of and the Church today warns the rich against hoarding, exploitation and devastation of nature. St. Giles invited humans to understand how they were related to the natural world and therefore had a special responsibility to protect it.¹⁸

4.3. Christian Mystical Tradition: Francis of Assisi and Hildegard of Bingen

In 1979, St Francis of Assisi was proclaimed as the patron saint of Ecology and Ecologists.¹⁹ He emphasized the caring treatment of plants and animals as part of spiritual living. "He shows us just how inseparable the bond is between concern for nature, justice for the poor, commitment to society, and interior peace" (LS, 10). This explains that those who love nature will also love humans and those

¹⁴<https://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?recnum=5977>

¹⁵<http://catholiccecolgy.net/blog/st-giles-seventh-century-catholic-ecologist>

¹⁶<http://catholiccecolgy.net/blog/st-giles-seventh-century-catholic-ecologist>

¹⁷<http://catholiccecolgy.net/blog/st-giles-seventh-century-catholic-ecologist>

¹⁸<http://catholiccecolgy.blogspot.in/>

¹⁹R.S. Amalraj, *Saints for Every Day*, Dindigul: Vaigarai Publications, 2006, 301.

who hate and oppress nature will also do the same to humans. Listening to nature and learning from it are the lessons that humans need to learn from Francis of Assisi. The canticle of Brother Sun (known as the "*laudes creaturarum*" — praise of creatures) is a very good example of nature mysticism.

Francis found the face of God in nature and felt strongly the presence of God in it. He understood that humans have a deep connection with nature. Pope Francis rightly points out in his Encyclical *LS* that Saint Francis "was particularly concerned for God's creation and for the poor and outcast. He loved, and was deeply loved for his joy, his generous self-giving, his openheartedness. He was a mystic and a pilgrim who lived in simplicity and in wonderful harmony with God, with others, with nature and with himself" (*LS*, 10). That was how, he could talk to Sun, Moon, Stars, birds, animals, and call them brothers and sisters and he could calm down the wolves which are generally dangerous. It is a famous song of solidarity with the creatures and creations. The entire creation is a messenger of God, telling us how God loves us.

Francis realized that he was part and parcel of nature and he was able to listen and understand the voice and movement of nature. In this way he tells us to respect nature, be conscious of nature, and find God in nature and above all love God in nature. Such an attitude enables us not to exploit nature for our selfish ends, rather to protect it and live with it. "If we approach nature and environment without this openness to awe and wonder, if we no longer speak the language of fraternity and beauty in our relationship with the world, our attitude will be that of masters, consumers, ruthless exploiters, unable to set limits on their immediate needs" (*LS*, 11). Moreover, "the poverty and austerity of Saint Francis were no mere veneer of asceticism, but something much more radical: a refusal to turn reality into an object simply to be used and controlled" (*LS*, 11).

St Francis saw "nature as a magnificent book in which God speaks to us and grants us a glimpse of his infinite beauty and goodness" (*LS*, 12). That was the reason why he asked part of the friary garden to be left free, so that wild flowers and herbs could grow and those who saw them could praise and thank God the Creator (*LS*, 12).

Hildegard of Bingen had a strong feeling for nature. She explained to people, how they could live healthily. She realized that humankind is deeply connected with nature. If humans were to live happily, they need to respect nature. She saw the connection among all created realities. She developed a medical system and planted trees and

plants. She healed many people by herbal medicines. Even today in the German speaking countries like, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, the medicinal system that she introduced is spreading fast and helping people to live a natural and healthy life. She emphasized the vital connection between the 'green' health of the natural world and the holistic health of the human person.²⁰ She spread the good news that God has given us so many good things in and through nature.

5. Catholic Teaching and Environmental Stewardship

The new understanding of environmental stewardship comes from the Christian understanding of God's revelation. It is God who created the entire cosmos, the world and all that it has. It is God who created humans in his likeness and image (Gen 1:27) and entrusted to them the world with the responsibility of tilling it and keeping it (Gen 2:15). Humans have a two-tier responsibility. On the one hand human beings produce things in cooperation with nature; on the other hand they have a great responsibility of maintaining the world with its ecological balance.

Sustainability and environmental ethics are the key words today. Ecological balance is not only to protect nature but also to sustain it. Sustainability ethics analyzes the issues regarding our moral obligations to future generations with respect to the environment.²¹ Ecological balance is not only to protect nature but also to sustain it. The present human ethics is unfortunately, selfish, destructive, profit-oriented, dehumanizing. Thus it stands in opposition to the Church's doctrines on God and creation.

6. Ecological Concerns in Indian Catholic Church

In June 5, 2011, the following message was communicated by both Catholic News India and the *Times of India*. The Church in India protests against mining, deforestation and aggressive promotion of eco-tourism by the government of Goa, as it was eating into Goa's green cover.²²

In 2012, the Archdiocese of Madras-Mylapore organized a public and ecumenical protest meeting against the sacrilege of a statue of Mary in Idinthakarai. During the meeting many spoke and protested also against the nuclear power plants at Koodankulam.

²⁰https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hildegard_of_Bingen

²¹<http://www.slideshare.net/drsuneel/environmental-worldviews-ethics>

²²<http://catholicology.blogspot.in/2011/06/battle-lines-are-drawn-in-go-india.html>

More positively there are some individuals and groups of religious men and women belonging to various congregations in Tamil Nadu who promote ecological concerns. For example, Muhil Centre near Madurai promotes herbal garden and herbal medicines. The sisters of Servite congregation at Muthupatti in Sivagangai Diocese, maintain a herbal garden and administer herbal medicine. The Capuchin brothers have a herbal garden in Trichy and healing ministry by herbal medicine. They also organize seminars and conferences on eco-consciousness, eco-justice and herbal medicine.

In 2004, under the leadership of Fr Amalraj, the then parish priest of Thangachimadam a human chain protest was organized against the Sethu Samuthiram Project. In 2005, the Catholics of Pudukottai organized a protest rally against a distillery which polluted air, land and ground water. A case was filed in the high court of Chennai, and that distillery was closed down.

Most of the Catholic religious doing educational and health ministries in India can do still more creatively to transform humans and society. Here I present an example for us to reflect. A layman, Mr Edwin, has started a school in Madurai with a name "Iyarkai" meaning nature, where the children are taught the interconnectedness of humans with nature. They are helped to understand and practice, how to love and respect nature, how to take responsibility to maintain eco-balance, as well as to protest against injustice done to nature, animals and humans. Today our faith commitment can be complete only when we are committed to eco-justice and eco-well being of all.

7. Ecological Concerns in Other Churches in India

In September 2010, the executive committee of the Church of South India's (CSI) General Synod issued a statement expressing 'her deep solidarity' with the protestors at Koodankulam and said that the 'huge radioactive accumulations at the plant site could become the principal causes of environmental and health hazards' in the event of disaster.²³ On 27 October 2011 the CSI Bishop J.A.D. Jebachandran, in Thoothukudi-Nazareth and approximately 100 clergy from his diocese joined the local Catholic leaders at Koodankulam offering their support to the anti-nuclear protestors.²⁴

An inter-denominational network of Christian churches in Kerala, South India, and the Joint Ecological Commission (JEC) sought to

²³<http://geoconger.wordpress.com/category/anglican-church-news/church-of-south-india/>

²⁴<http://geoconger.wordpress.com/category/anglican-church-news/church-of-south-india/>

build an Eco-Church fellowship, to promote eco-friendly lifestyles, and participate in the global spiritual-environmental movement. Drawing on Christian scripture and tradition, the JEC emphasized the human responsibility to care for the Earth as God's creation and called on Christians to expand the theological category of "neighbor" to include all of creation.²⁵

8. Ecological Concerns in the Universal Church

There was an ecumenical meeting in Basel, Switzerland from 15 to 21 May in 1989. It took three themes, namely, peace, justice and sustaining of nature. It was declared that all the Churches could work together to create a new world where there is peace built on justice with a deeper concern for nature. God expects us to participate in God's project of creating a new heaven and a new earth. From the early 70s of the last Century till 2002, there had been three Papal Statements promoting ecological concerns and ecological ethics.²⁶ In his apostolic letter *Octogesima Adveniens*, Pope Paul VI (1971) says, "Due to an ill-considered exploitation of nature, humanity runs the risk of destroying it and becoming in turn a victim of this degradation."²⁷ In two of his Encyclicals, Pope John Paul II declares that, "humans must preserve both the natural and human environments."²⁸

Moreover, Pope John Paul II's call to Americans for ecological preservation and reducing consumption (*Ecclesia in America*, 25), his message to people of Asia to care for their environment (*Ecclesia in Asia*, 41), and his call to the people of Oceania to work towards preserving their environment (*Ecclesia in Oceania*, 31), are all clear expressions of the Universal Church for ecological justice, ethics and preservation.²⁹

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* invites all humans to understand that their dominion over animate and inanimate beings is

²⁵http://fore.research.yale.edu/religion/christianity/projects/joint_eco.html

²⁶1. Paul VI, "A Hospitable Earth for Future Generations," Address to the Stockholm Conference on Human Environment (1 June 1972); 2. John Paul II, "The Ecological Crisis: A Common Responsibility" World Day of Peace Message (1990); 3. John Paul II and Eastern Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, "Joint Declaration on Articulating a Code of Environmental Ethics," (The Venice Declaration) (2002).

²⁷Paul VI, Apostolic Letter *Octogesima Adveniens*, 21, AAS 63 (1971) 416-417.

²⁸John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, 37-38, and *Evangelium Vitae*, 42.

²⁹http://w2.vatican.va/content/johnpaulii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_22011999_ecclesia-in-america.html; http://w2.vatican.va/content/johnpaul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_06111999_ecclesia-in-asia.html; http://w2.vatican.va/content/johnpaulii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_20011122_ecclesia-in-oceania.html

not absolute, to follow the saints in caring and loving animals, to use them only to a reasonable limit for caring for and saving human life and to have a discerning love between humans and animals, and to protect them.³⁰ The seventh commandment [thou shalt not steal] enjoins respect for the integrity of creation. Animals, like plants and inanimate beings, are by nature destined for the common good of past, present, and future humanity. Use of the mineral, vegetable, and animal resources of the universe cannot be divorced from respect for moral imperatives. Man's dominion over inanimate and other living beings granted by the Creator is not absolute; it is limited by concern for the quality of life of his neighbour, including generations to come; it requires a religious respect for the integrity of creation.³¹

Animals are God's creatures. He surrounds them with his providential care. By their mere existence they bless him and give him glory. Thus men owe them kindness. We should recall the gentleness with which saints like St Francis of Assisi or St Philip Neri treated animals.³² God entrusted animals to the stewardship of those whom he created in his own image. Hence it is legitimate to use animals for food and clothing. They may be domesticated to help man in his work and leisure. Medical and scientific experimentation on animals is a morally acceptable practice if it remains within reasonable limits and contributes to caring for or saving human lives.³³ It is contrary to human dignity to cause animals to suffer or die needlessly. It is likewise unworthy to spend money on them that should as a priority go to the relief of human misery. One can love animals; one should not direct to them the affection due only to persons.

9. *Laudato Si*, "Praise be to you, my Lord," Care for our Common Home

The encyclical is prophetic, as it speaks in the name of God and on behalf of the poor, the oppressed, the excluded and the vulnerable and the suffering earth. It is scientific, based on the present day human experience and data and it is *very inclusive*. It includes and invites all churches, religions, nations and all humans to respond and commit themselves for the protection of the earth. Pope Francis includes all the concerns expressed by scientists, philosophers, theologians, civic groups, other churches, Christian communities and other religions who all have in one voice expressed their concern and

³⁰*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 2415.

³¹*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 2416.

³²*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 2417.

³³*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 2418.

their 'reflections on issues which all of us find disturbing' (LS, 3-9). It is inclusive, as the Pope reflects on what a few of his predecessors had already spoken on the same subject. It is inclusive as it takes inspirations and reflections from bishops all over the world: Bishops of Southern Africa (LS, 14), Bishops of Japan (LS, 85), Bishops of Brazil (LS, 88), the bishops of Paraguay (LS, 94). It is inclusive as the Pope invites the whole human family to respond responsibly to protect nature (LS, 13, 14).

The encyclical adopts a theological methodology (LS, 15) which is very much in practice today in Asian, African and Latin American countries. Pope Francis begins with (a) *experience* of the present situation (LS, 15, 17, 18) in which we find ourselves (pollution, waste and the throwaway culture: LS, 20, 21, 22). The Pope proceeds in doing an elaborate (b) *analysis* of why and how of it. Then he (c) *reflects on God, Jesus and the word of God for insights, inspiration and enlightenment*, and tries to know the will of God and finally suggests a number of (d) *action programmes* to protect and save mother earth.

9.1. Experience

Another important point that makes the encyclical very inclusive is its presentation, explaining clearly the connection between the suffering of the poor, outcaste, the excluded, the vulnerable with the suffering nature (LS, 10, 13, 16, 20, 22, 25). That is why Francis says with conviction that "the growing poverty and the lack of drinking water to the poor are caused by environmental degradation" (LS, 29-30), and that "all attacks on the environment are suffered by the poorest" (LS, 48). "Hence every ecological approach needs to incorporate a social perspective which takes into account the fundamental rights of the poor and the underprivileged" (LS, 93).

9.2. Analysis

In his analysis, the Pope refers to many issues, problems and the challenges that we face today like global warming, rise in the sea level and deforestation (LS, 20, 21, 22, 23). He refers the extinction of part of the planet's biodiversity and the loss of tropical forests (LS, 24). He further refers to the climate change (LS, 25), the loss of species (LS, 32), and its grave socio-political and environmental implications, current models of production and consumption (LS, 26) and the depletion of natural resources (LS, 27). He points out the consequence of detergents and chemical products commonly used, that continue to pour into our rivers, lakes and seas (LS, 29).

Francis speaks about the lack of awareness regarding the wastage of water both in the developed and developing world (LS, 30). He

perceives that the control of water by large multinational businesses will soon become a major source of conflict (LS, 31). He brings to our attention how humans are responsible for the disappearance of thousands of plant and animal species every year (LS, 33). He also observes that the degree of human intervention, often in the service of business interests and consumerism, is actually making our earth less rich and less beautiful (LS, 34).

He draws our attention to the uncontrolled fishing which leads to a drastic depletion of certain species (LS, 40), and turns the seas into underwater cemeteries bereft life (LS, 41). He invites us to think seriously about many cities which have become unhealthy to live in, because of pollution (LS, 44).

Moreover, the gap between the rich and the poor is widening. Such an inequality affects not only individuals but also entire societies and countries (LS, 51). We lack leaders who can really show us new ways of dealing with the environmental problems (LS, 53). Many global summits have failed in solving these environmental problems that we face today and it shows clearly “that our politics is subject to technology and finance” (LS, 54). “We need but think of the nuclear bombs dropped in the middle of the twentieth century, or the array of technology which Nazism, Communism and other totalitarian regimes have employed to kill millions of people, to say nothing of the increasingly deadly arsenal of weapons available for modern warfare and being owned by a minority” (LS, 104). Moreover “The technocratic paradigm also tends to dominate economic and political life. The economy accepts every advance in technology with a view to profit, without concern for its potentially negative impact on human beings” (LS, 109). We need liberation from the technocratic paradigm (LS, 112). This is why the pope says that the technological development “has not been accompanied by a development in human responsibility, values and conscience” (LS, 84). Thus we understand “how environmental deterioration and human and ethical degradation are closely linked” (LS, 56).

9.3. Insights from Scriptures

Pope Francis says that *Faith* can motivate Christians and other believers, “to care for nature and for the most vulnerable of their brothers and sisters (LS, 64). “Faith allows us to interpret the meaning and the mysterious beauty of what is unfolding” (LS, 79). He reflects on the creation stories (LS, 65-71) and calls for action: ‘Tilling’ refers to cultivating, ploughing or working, while ‘keeping’ means caring, protecting, overseeing and preserving. This implies a relationship of mutual responsibility between human beings and nature.

He makes a brief reference to Psalms, explaining that we together with all creatures and all creation need to praise God the creator (LS, 72). "By the word of the Lord the heavens were made" (Ps 33:6) (LS, 77). The entire creation is intended, planned and created by God. That is why it is rightly said, 'Creation is the order of love' and every creature has its place and right to exist. Then he reflects on the prophets and says that it is God the Creator who liberates us from all evils and all injustice (LS, 73-74). Thus creation and salvation/liberation are the two divine ways of acting and that are intimately and inseparably connected (LS, 74).

Then he speaks on the mystery of the Universe (LS, 76-83). Speaking on the two concepts Nature and Creation he differentiates Creation from nature: "...nature can be studied as a system but Creation, a gift from God... we have our duty 'to protect nature and develop its potential'" (LS, 76-78). We have a God who respects and loves every individual as a subject, dwelling in every creature, manifesting God's Self (LS, 84-88), and expects him/her to cooperate with God in protecting and developing nature (LS, 80). "The biblical accounts of creation invite us to see each human being as a subject who can never be reduced to the status of an object" (LS, 81).

Reflecting on Jesus and his vision and mission, the pope reflects that one person of the Trinity who through the mystery of incarnation is "...at work in a hidden manner in the natural world as a whole..." (LS, 99). Jesus invites his disciples "to recognize the paternal relationship God has with all his creatures" (LS, 96) to have constant touch with nature and "contemplate and admire" it (LS, 100) with "fondness and wonder" (LS, 97), to understand that "All things have been created through him and for him" (Col 1:16).

9.4. Action Programmes

Having drawn inspiration from the scriptures, the pope speaks of an "*integral ecology*, one which clearly respects its human and social dimensions" (LS, 137-162). And he calls for action to care, protect, oversee and preserve the earth (LS, 65-71):

- a) Pope Francis calls for a change of life style, production and consumption (LS, 23).
- b) He says that there is an urgent need to develop policies in the next few years so that the emission of carbon dioxide and other highly polluting gases can be drastically reduced, for example, substituting fossil fuels and developing sources of renewable energy (LS, 26).
- c) Greater investment needs to be made in understanding more fully the functioning of ecosystems and adequately analyzing the different

variables associated with any significant modification of the environment (LS, 42).

d) The developed countries ought to assist poorer countries to support policies and programmes of sustainable development (LS, 52).

e) The establishment of a legal framework which can set clear boundaries and ensure the protection of ecosystems.

f) Cooperation (LS, 64) and dialogue in the international community (LS, 164-175) for new national and local policies (LS, 176-181); dialogue and transparency in decision making (LS, 182-188); dialogue between politics and economy for human fulfilment (LS, 189-198); dialogue between religions and science (199-201).

g) The pope recommends ecological education and spirituality (LS, 209-215) to be promoted at different levels — “at school, in families, in the media, in catechesis and elsewhere” (LS, 213).

h) Finally he calls for an ecological conversion from all of us (LS, 216-221) and recommends interreligious and ecumenical collaboration to achieve the goal of being responsible for mother earth (LS, 246).

10. Towards a Meaningful Future for the Local and Universal Church

In our Christian traditions, inculturation and interreligious dialogue should facilitate the liberation/salvation of the poor, the excluded and the vulnerable. When we journey through them towards integral human liberation which includes today eco-liberation as well, that makes the Reign of God flourish. In this journey, Indian and other churches in the world need to adopt two kinds of approaches: centrifugal and centripetal.

The centrifugal approach is instrumental in forming the local Christian Communities of the poor and the oppressed with equality and brotherhood. The foundation for such communities is Jesus Christ who is the way to heavenly father, lover of Nature, teacher of liberation and redemption and the symbol of unity. Faith that does justice could only be actualized when Christians from local churches, following Jesus, generously give their life for the poor, the oppressed and the crucified nature.

Centripetal involvement is working among the poor and the oppressed outside the local churches. Jesus who was filled with the Holy Spirit (Lk 4:8) started his journey of liberation/salvation by relating to the downtrodden and respecting their humanness. If the churches in India and in the world sincerely follow Jesus they need to give a special attention to the poor, the oppressed and the crucified

nature, to raise them from their lower status and broken state by creating awareness. This raises them from the state of deprivation to the state of fulfilment. The centripetal approach demands the local Christian churches to take side with people's movements organized by the poor, agricultural coolies, Adivasis, Dalits, women, fisher folk, street children, refugees and the oppressed, the ecological and environmental movements, in their struggle for justice. By this the poor and the oppressed are able to decide for themselves and to live with respect, dignity and fullness and the ecological system will be liberated from the clutches of historical, structural, societal and individual sins. This is the plan of God for nature and the poor in India and in the world today. To achieve this integral human liberation with the help of faith and Christian tradition that does justice, the churches need to be involved in interreligious dialogue and get rooted in cultures. Such an involvement will bring an ecological integrity with socio-economic and socio-political justice through constructive human actions in bringing social equality and environmental health and balance. This is being strongly expressed by Pope Francis in his encyclical: "Peace, justice and the preservation of creation are three absolutely interconnected themes, which cannot be separated and treated individually without once again falling into reductionism" (LS, 92).

11. Conclusion

God has created this world. It has its purpose. God in and through nature loves us. God wants us to live in this world happy and healthy. He has given us an opportunity to take from nature whatever helps us and live as God's children, and to be responsible for the nature as well as responsible for the generations to come. He wants us to avoid everything that destroys life, because every negative action against nature comes from a negative attitude towards God and his creation.

In the context of Asia, joining with all men and women of good will, the Asian bishops and theologians invite all Asians "to stand together in sustaining primordial values of humanity, of human community, of our communion with mother earth."³⁴ They present the tribal people, who for millennia "lived in creative harmony with the land and preserved a rich sense of community and hospitality,"³⁵

³⁴Rosales, 329, No. 25; 330, No. 33-35.

³⁵Rosales, 329, No. 22. Paul F. Knitter, *Jesus and the Other Names*, 11. The experience and the encounter of Knitter with the native North American sisters and brothers confirms the experience and encounter of the bishops and Christians with the native

as a wonderful model and example to be followed for a life of harmony with nature.

Christian tradition is filled with symbolic, parabolic and prophetic traditions that need to guide the future of the Church in India and the world. Pope Francis points out that “the work of the Church seeks not only to remind everyone of the duty to care for nature, but at the same time “she must above all protect mankind from self-destruction” (LS, 79). Moreover he also says that the cry of the poor is not heard by the decision makers both locally and internationally (LS, 49), because “they live and reason from the comfortable position of a high level of development and a quality of life well beyond the reach of the majority of the world’s population.” He recommends for a true ecological approach based on the reality of our society (a social approach) “to hear *both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor*” (LS, 49).

We live in a symbolic world. Symbols give meaning to our life. Many symbols in Christian traditions like, bread, fish, light, oil, vine and branches, shepherd and sheep, fruit yielding trees and many others are symbols of creation and life. These symbols are to be reinterpreted today to save and protect the suffering nature, the poor and the outcaste. There are many parables like the man who sowed good seeds, grain of mustard seed, merchant in search of a fine pearl, and Good Samaritan which are to be reinterpreted to stop the destruction of Nature. We too have prophetic traditions in the Church, as we have now in the person of pope Francis, that enlighten leaders to speak in favour of nature, to condemn all those actions and decisions that devastate nature and are causes of climate change and ill health to many humans around the globe. In our world today, LS of Pope Francis is timely and invites all of us to pray, reflect over the encyclical and to be converted in our policies, life style and decisions and plunge into action to protect the nature, the poor and the outcaste.

people in Asia: “More clearly and intensely than ever, I saw that dialogue must include liberation, and that liberation must include the Earth, for here was a people who could not talk about the Sacred without talking about the Earth and who could not talk about the horrid sufferings they themselves have endured without talking about the sufferings of Earth animals. For me, this has become a paradigm for all interreligious encounters.”