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INTERRELATED OPTION FOR THE POOR AND THE EARTH

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Abstract

The global world which is characterized by postmodern world view is beset not only with numerous basic socio-economic, religio-cultural problems but also with ecological problems. If humans continue to oppress the poor and to destroy the ecosystems, then we will soon run out of balance of our life on this universe. The earth is ultimately *a common heritage, the fruits of which are for the benefit of all*. An Integral ecological care of the earth invites the human community to view it as God-centred and be accountable. The option for the poor and the earth are interrelated. Nature will truly enjoy its second spring only when humanity has compassion for its own members. A right education in ecological care and genuine concern for the poor entails a transformation in ways of thought, behaviour, and lifestyle. Everyone must recognize her/his obligation to contribute to the restoration of a healthy environment and humanity.

Keywords: Cosmos, Earth, Ecology, Degradation, Option, Poor, Transformation

Introduction

The global world is fast changing. We do notice the explosion of information and knowledge, the spread of modern science and technology to all parts of the world, which makes every human being our neighbour. A careful examination of the postmodern reality highlights the fact that our society and polity are confronted with

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progress in many fields and yet lag behind in many other realms. A serious crisis in values is also indicated by the way people ruthlessly seek money, wealth, power, position, name and fame using fair or foul means. Corruption and exploitation, injustice and inequality, oppression of the poor and the marginalized, war and violence abound at all levels: local, national and international. The fundamental struggle of the poor for food, shelter and clothing emerges as a major challenge. The global world which is characterized by postmodern worldview is beset not only with numerous basic socio-economic, religio-cultural problems but also with ecological problems.

The poor are becoming poorer and the world peace or order is disrupted not only by the arms race, regional and national conflicts and continued injustices among peoples and nations, but also by a lack of *due respect for the earth*. The plundering of natural resources and oppression of the poor cause the decline in the quality of the earth and human life. This article focuses on the need to care for the poor and the earth. The first part presents the unequal situation of the poor and the imbalance in the nature or earth. The second part deals with the interrelated option between the poor and the nature. The conclusion of the article invites everyone to care for the poor and the earth, because both are interconnected.

1. Inequality of the Poor and Ecological Imbalance of the Earth

If one assesses the overall socio-economic development of the world, the situation is appalling. Globalization has brought socio-economic prosperity to some, but it has left too many others mired in debt, poverty, exploitation, and oppression. Greater high-tech industrialization not only keeps many of the poor unemployed, and underemployed but also hinders village industries without providing alternate jobs. The ecological imbalance caused by deforestation has created global warming, drought, and famine where the victims are primarily the poor and the marginalized.

1.1. Inequality of the Poor

Our postmodern society is one racked by almost permanent and extreme crises. We have a good number of people who still suffer from a criminal lack of basic amenities, who cannot afford one square meal a day, who have to walk for hours in scorching terrain to get water for their daily needs. On the other hand, we have a small minority of the world population at the top of the social pyramid who lead a life of luxury and consumerism. In the middle, there is a

group who find life tolerably good in spite of mounting pressures of the rising cost of living. But for many, daily life is a struggle for basic amenities. For example, C.T. Kurien, with regard to the situation of massive poverty, states that India's massive poverty is a kind that is unprecedented in history, and which has no parallel anywhere else in the world today.¹

The socio-economic system is geared to producing profits for the big industrialists, the owners of the monopoly houses, the great landlords and the mighty businessmen by flooding the market with luxury goods while creating a scarcity of essential commodities for the poorer masses. In every aspect, this marginalization of the poor and aggrandizement of the rich is effected by way of uneven distribution of wealth, power, position, employment, and natural resources. Power and wealth are concentrated in a few who use their connections with the political rulers for their own benefit.

The poor are poor not because of lack of resources, but because of high imbalances in the distribution of resources. Amartya Sen states, "There is little doubt that the penury of the poor does, in fact, affect the well-being of the rich."² Often we blame the poor for their poverty. Do we ever question the rich of their responsibility? While the warehouses are full of grain, why does over one third of the Indian population go to bed on an empty stomach? This issue is not only an economic issue it is also a social, political, moral and ecological issue.³

1.2. Ecological Imbalance of the Earth

The whole universe is God's dwelling and He has gifted the earth to human beings as their temporary home with the blessings of the nature. The natural resources are serving human needs well by providing food, shelter, clothing and energy. Taking these for granted results in environmental consequences that affect all life forms on this planet.⁴ As heirs and victims of the technological advancement,

¹C.T. Kurien, *Poverty and Development*, New Delhi: Orient Longman Limited, 1996, 123.

²Amartya Sen, *Poverty and Feminine. An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981, 9-10.

³Prakash Louis, "New Paradigms in Social Action: Issues and Perspectives," in *Christian Contribution to Nation Building. A Third Millennium Enquiry*" Selvister Ponnumuthan, Chacko Aerath & George Menacherry, ed., Cochin: Documentary Committee of CBCI – KCBC National Celebration of the Jubilee of St Thomas and St Francis Xavier, 2004, 261.

⁴Kristina Dems, "Loss of Natural Resources: Who Is to Blame?" <http://www.brighthub.com/environment/science-environmental/articles/68899.aspx> (accessed 25 October, 2015).

today's human beings have grown estranged from the natural scale and rhythms of life on earth. So much so that humanity's survival itself is at risk, which is brought about by the continuing depletion of natural resources. Micheal Amaladoss presents the degrading situation of the human beings and the earth in the following statements.

If we look around the world today we can become aware of the spirit of anthropocentrism that does not respect the rest of creation, but rather abuses and exploits it, the unbridled consumerism and the power and technology that promote it, not hesitating to consume the resources of the earth in a disproportionate manner, the misappropriation for the earth's good that increases inequality among people, the growing impoverishment and desertification of the earth, the arrival of biotechnologies that interfere with the processes of nature, the growth of technology and the sense of power that it gives that make a few believe that they are the masters of the earth, 'an attitude of secularism that has no place for God in the world and in human lives, an unjust economy based on a free market which has only increasing profit as its goal, a spirit of relativism that does not acknowledge universal values and throwaway culture that produces mountains of waste.⁵

Environmental degradation is the disintegration of the earth or deterioration of the environment which occurs when earth's natural resources are depleted and environment is compromised in the form of extinction of species, pollution in air, water and soil, and rapid growth in population.⁶ Pope Francis said, "This is one of the greatest challenges of our time: to convert ourselves to a type of development that knows how to respect creation." "When I look at America, also my own homeland (South America), so many forests, all cut, that have become land ... that can no longer give life. This is our sin, exploiting the earth and not allowing her to give us what she has within her."⁷

Many modern discoveries demonstrate the nobility of the human vocation to participate *responsibly* in God's creative action in the world. Unfortunately, the applications of some of these discoveries in the fields of industry and agriculture have produced harmful long-term effects. This has led to the painful realization that we cannot

⁵Michael Amaladoss, "A Spirituality of Creation," *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection*, 79, 8 (August 2015) 565-578.

⁶"What is Environmental Degradation?" <http://www.conserve-energy-future.com/causes-and-effects-of-environmental-degradation.php> (accessed 26 October, 2015).

⁷"Pope Francis Calls Destruction of Nature a Modern Sin," <http://ecowatch.com/2014/07/07/pope-francis-destruction-nature-modern-sin/> (accessed 26.10.2015).

interfere in one area of the ecosystem without paying due attention both to the consequences of such interference in other areas and to the well-being of future generations. The gradual depletion of the ozone layer and the related “greenhouse effect” has now reached crisis proportions as a consequence of industrial growth, massive urban concentrations and vastly increased energy needs. In many parts of the world society is given to instant gratification and consumerism while remaining indifferent to the damage which these cause.⁸

The most profound and serious indication of the moral implications underlying the ecological problem is the lack of *respect for life* evident in many patterns of ecological contamination. Pope Francis insists that the material universe has its own dignity and purpose that the humans have to respect.⁹ Pope John Paul II states, “Often, the interests of production prevail over concern for the dignity of workers, while economic interests take priority over the good of individuals and even entire peoples. In these cases, pollution or environmental destruction is the result of an unnatural and reductionist vision which at times leads to a genuine contempt for human beings.”¹⁰ Today’s society will find no solution to the ecological problem unless it takes a serious look at its lifestyle.

2. Interrelated Option between the Poor and the Nature

Everything relies on everything else around it. Our planet is alive and interconnected and we are part of that web. Pope Francis states, “God has joined us so closely to the world around us that we can feel the desertification of the soil almost as a physical ailment, and the extinction of a species as a painful disfigurement.”¹¹ Our natural ecosystems are finding it hard to cope with the different pressures and are unable to adjust. If we continue depleting the natural resources and destroy our environment, soon it will be too late for them to recover, even with human help. The impacts of ecosystem destruction are manifested in increased flooding due to the erosion of soil and lack of trees; rising of the sea levels due to the melting of the

⁸“The Ecological Crisis a Common Responsibility: Peace with God the Creator, Peace with all of Creation,” <http://www.acton.org/public-policy/environmental-stewardship/theology-e/roman-catholic-church-holy-see-environment>.

⁹Francis, *Laudato Si* (LS), Encyclical Letter (2015), 84-85.

¹⁰John Paul II, “Message for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace,” 1 January 1990, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_19891208_xxiii-world-day-for-peace.html (accessed 8 March, 2016).

¹¹Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG), Apostolic Exhortations (2013), 89.

glaciers, caused by Global Warming; water shortage; food shortage; loss of biodiversity; pollution; rising temperatures, etc.¹²

The ecological problem is intimately connected to justice for the poor. "The goods of the earth, which in the divine plan should be a common patrimony," Pope John Paul II has reminded us, "often risk becoming the monopoly of a few who often spoil it and, sometimes destroy it, thereby creating a loss for all humanity."¹³ In the name of development the poor are exploited. Unrestrained economic development is not the means to improving the lives of the poor. A "mere accumulation of goods and services, even for the benefit of the majority is not enough for the realization of human happiness."¹⁴ Pope John Paul II has also warned that in desire "to have and to enjoy rather than to be and to grow," humanity "consumes the resources of the earth subjecting it without restraint...as if it did not have its own God-given purposes."¹⁵

2.1. Option for the Poor

Option for the poor and the earth demands moderation and even austerity in the use of material resources. It also encourages a balanced view of human progress consistent with respect for nature and the poor. It also requires those affluent and rich persons to seek ways to reduce and restructure their overconsumption of natural resources and to eliminate the oppressive situation of the poor and those in the periphery. Pope John Paul II has noted, "There is a greater realization of the limits of available resources, and of the need to respect the integrity and the cycles of nature and to take them into account when planning for development..."¹⁶ To eliminate hunger from the planet, the world community needs to reform the institutional and political structures that restrict the access of people to food.

Human concern for the earth must be manifested in the concern for the poor. It must also be said that the proper ecological balance will not be found without *directly addressing the structural forms of poverty* that exist throughout the world. Rural poverty and unjust

¹²<http://www.theworldcounts.com/stories/Impact-of-Ecosystem-Destruction> (accessed 26 October, 2015).

¹³John Paul II, Address at Conference Marking the Presentation of the Second Edition of the St Francis "Canticle of the Creatures" International Award for the Environment (October 25, 1991).

¹⁴John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1987), 28.

¹⁵John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1987), 28. See also <http://www.webofcreation.org/DenominationalStatements/catholic.htm> (accessed 8 March, 2016).

¹⁶John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 26.

land distribution in many countries, for example, have led to subsistence farming and to the exhaustion of the soil. Once their land yields no more, many farmers move on to clear new land, thus accelerating uncontrolled deforestation, or they settle in urban centres which lack the infrastructure to receive them. Likewise, some heavily indebted countries are destroying their natural heritage, at the price of irreparable ecological imbalances, in order to develop new products for export. In such situations it would be wrong to assign the responsibility to the poor alone for the negative environmental consequences of their actions. Rather, the poor, to whom the earth is entrusted no less than to others, must be enabled to find a way out of their poverty.

The preferential option for the poor is the demand of the Gospel. The dignity of the human person is part of the content of proclamation. The social message of the Gospel is the basis and motivation for transformative action. The preferential option for the poor extends to all those who suffer from any form of poverty, whether it is economic or cultural or spiritual or moral. In fact love for others is made concrete in the promotion of justice. With Christ, we are called to be on the side of the poor. Pope Francis writes, "Everything in the world is related and our common pilgrimage towards God recognizes the love he has for every creature and unites us with them" (LS, 91).

The Vatican Council II has given new impetus to active involvement in social change. There is no more excuse to adopt a neutral attitude or a political stance under the pretext of piety. Neutrality in the matter of social justice means supporting the unjust status quo, directly or indirectly. Now it is clear that working for social justice is a demand of faith itself.¹⁷

There is no such thing as neutrality in an inter-connected and inter-acting complex mechanism that society is. For not to decide is to decide; not to speak out, is to approve of; not to be with the exploited is to be with the exploiters; not to be in solidarity with the dominated is to support the dominant.¹⁸

The experience of the poor — being nobody and having no worth and living in a state of powerlessness and voicelessness — makes them

¹⁷Paul VI, Apostolic Letter, *Octogesima Adveniens*, 46 (14 May 1971), http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_letters/documents/hf_p-vi_apl_19710514_octogesima-adveniens.html (accessed 8 March, 2016).

¹⁸D.S. Amalorpavadoss, "The Poor With No Voice and No Power," in *Tensions Between the Churches of the First World and the Third World*, ed. Virgil Elizondo and Norbert Greinacher, Edinburgh: T&T Ltd, 1981, 50.

turn to the power of God and cry to him for help and intervention with the hope of transformation and liberation. On the part of God, he does not ignore or forget them; instead he comes to their aid in and through people dedicated to the cause of the poor (Mt 10; Lk 9:1- 6).

The mobilization of the poor to change the situation is the only way to eradicate poverty. If all the poor people of the world rise up, the powers and structures will tremble and such rising up is the means for radical change. The responsibility of everyone is to join hands with others in contributing towards this uprising of the poor. Our experience with the poor teaches that poverty cannot be eradicated only by charity or modernization or by development. It is a socio-economic, religio-cultural and political issue that needs to be addressed by proclaiming and establishing a rule of justice and contributing to the emergence of a counter culture, which would affirm God's kingdom. It is a commitment for a radical action to bring a new Heaven and a new Earth.

The option for the poor is to enhance the power of the powerless by raising critical awareness of their situation and by organizing them to help themselves become capable of making decisions conducive to affirm their right and fight injustice and progress in a co-operative manner. It implies evolving together with the people a new vision of society, which will bring about a transformation of relationships and institutions that are operative today. In other words, it is enabling people to channelize their energies into movements that will bring all segments of people into the larger movement of integral human growth, both material and spiritual. It will contribute towards evolving new perspectives for the human family to resolve its uncertainties, problems and tensions and to walk together on the path of harmony, progress and peace.

2.2. Option for the Nature

The earth is God's and is given to humans as a gift. Everyone has a right to share the good things of the earth according to one's needs. The natural resources are also given to humanity as a collective good and patrimony to be used with personal and collective responsibility (LS, 94-95). Disturbing the balance of an ecosystem can be disastrous for all the living things relying on it. Our Earth is also considered as an ecosystem on a much larger scale. When we introduce external factors such as too much carbon dioxide or methane, it destroys the balance of the ecosystem which in turn affects those who live in it. The results are global warming, water shortage, extinction of species, etc. These

impact every living thing on the planet, which includes us. The impact of ecosystem destruction will be felt by everything eventually.

For many people, the environmental movement has reawakened appreciation of the truth that, through the created gifts of nature, men and women encounter their Creator. The Christian vision of considering earth as one of the sacramental signs of God, discloses the Creator's presence. This vision can contribute to making the earth a home for the human family once again. St John Paul II has called all Christians to respect and protect the environment, so that through nature people can "contemplate the mystery of the greatness and love of God."

When human beings turn their back on the Creator's plan, they provoke a disorder which has inevitable repercussions on the rest of the created order. If man/woman 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).

It is to the Creator of the universe, then, that we are accountable for what we do or fail to do to preserve and care for the earth and all its creatures. For "[t]he Lord's are the earth and its fullness; the world and those who dwell in it" (Ps 24:1). We, a part of creation dwelling in the earth which is the home of God, are called to live and to safeguard the earth as stewards within it, not as owners separated from it. As faithful stewards, fullness of life comes from living responsibly within God's creation and opting to care for it.¹⁹ Pope Francis insists on the personal responsibility of every human person in safeguarding the earth in its original beauty and fullness stating, "Earth is our common home and we are called to be instruments of God our Father, so that our planet might be what he desired when he created it and correspond with his plan for peace, beauty and fullness" (LS, 53).

2.3. Intrinsic Connection between the Life of the Poor and the Nature

Respect for nature and respect for poor are intrinsically related. Pope John Paul II stated, "Respect for life, and above all for the dignity of the human person," extends also to the rest of creation."²⁰ Only with equitable and sustainable socio-economic development can humans control continuing environmental degradation and avoid the

¹⁹http://www.ehow.com/info_8255141_effects-destroying-natural-environment.html (accessed 25 October, 2015).

²⁰John Paul II, "The Ecological Crisis: A Common Responsibility," World Day of Peace Message (1990), 7.

destructive effects of the kind of overdevelopment that has used natural resources irresponsibly and egoistically. In 1963, Pope John XXIII, in the letter *Pacem in Terris*, has emphasized the world's mounting interdependence and interrelatedness of all of God's creation. Pope Francis also delineated the direct link between the poor and the earth:

Many of the poor live in areas particularly affected by phenomena related to warming, and their means of subsistence are largely dependent on natural reserves and ecosystemic services such as agriculture, fishing and forestry... (LS, 25, 48). Our world has a grave social debt towards the poor who lack access to drinking water... (LS, 30). Today, however, we have to realize that a true ecological approach *always* becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear *both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor*... (LS, 49). The universe unfolds in God, who fills it completely. Hence, there is a mystical meaning to be found in a leaf, in a mountain, in a dewdrop, in a poor person's face (LS, 233).

Today the ecological care and concern has heightened the awareness of our dependent and interdependent universe. In this shrinking global world, everyone is affected and everyone is responsible, although those most responsible are often the least affected and those most vulnerable are most affected. "Green Pope," Benedict XVI says that when 'human ecology' is respected within society, environmental ecology also benefits.²¹

The universal common good can serve as a basis for a universal environmental ethic and ecological balance. All species, ecosystems, distinctive landscapes, much more the humans give glory to God. The covenant given to Noah was a promise to all the earth (Gen 9:1-17). Pope Benedict XVI states, "In nature, the believer recognizes the wonderful result of God's creative activity... The environment is God's gift to everyone, and in our use of it we have a responsibility..." We should respect "the intrinsic balance of creation." In other words, the human beings should not engage in irresponsible exploitation of the air, water or land and unnecessary disturbance of the natural world.²²

Pope John Paul II recognizing the need for a universal environmental ethic and care wrote, "Today the ecological crisis has assumed such proportions as to be the responsibility of everyone... [I]ts various aspects demonstrate the need for concerted efforts aimed at establishing the duties and obligations that belong to individuals,

²¹Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, 51.

²²Benedict XVI *Caritas in Veritate*, 48.

peoples, States and the international community.”²³ In *Centesimus Annus*, the Pope insisted that the state has the task of providing “for the defence and preservation of common good such as the natural and human environments, which cannot be safeguarded simply by market forces” (no 40). Pope Francis speaks of ‘inclusive ecology,’ and ‘integral ecology,’ which seeks to restore the various levels of ecological equilibrium, establishing harmony within ourselves, with others, with nature and other living creatures, and with God (LS, 210).

The universal common good of the human community is measured by the obligation of opting for and living in solidarity with the poor and the marginalized. A firm and preserving determination to commit oneself to the common good and a willingness to ‘lose oneself’ for the sake of the other, especially the poor and marginalized instead of exploiting [them] is a sign of interrelated reality of the human community and the cosmos.²⁴ In the face of the structural sins, option for the poor and the earth requires sacrifices of our own self-interest for the good of others and of the earth we share.

Conclusion

The fact that many challenges facing the world today with regard to the poor and the earth are interdependent confirms the need for carefully coordinated solutions based on a morally, ethically and ecologically coherent world view. The poor of the earth offer a special test of human solidarity. All religions speak of a harmonious universe, of a “cosmos” endowed with its own integrity, its own internal, dynamic balance. The earth is ultimately a common heritage, the fruits of which are for the benefit of all. In the words of the Second Vatican Council, “God destined the earth and all it contains for the use of every individual and all peoples” (GS, 69).

Today, the dramatic threats of ecological breakdown is teaching us the extent to which greed and selfishness — both individual and collective — are contrary to the order of creation, an order which is characterized by mutual interdependence. The option for the poor embedded in the Gospel and the Church’s teaching makes us aware that the poor suffer most directly from environmental decline and have the least access to relief from their suffering. Nature will truly enjoy its second spring only when humanity has compassion for its own members.

²³John Paul II, “The Ecological Crisis,” 15.

²⁴John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 38.

Faced with the widespread destruction of the environment, people everywhere are coming to understand that we cannot continue to use the goods of the earth as we have in the past. 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. Simplicity, moderation and discipline, as well as a spirit of sacrifice, must become a part of everyday life, lest all suffer the negative consequences of the careless habits of a few.

An education in ecological responsibility, and spirituality, care and concern for the earth, equity in sharing and caring for the poor is urgent. It is a responsibility of all. A right education in ecological care and genuine concern for the poor entail a transformation in ways of thought, behaviour and lifestyle.

An Integral ecological care of the earth invites us to view it as God-centred and be accountable. Our option for the poor and respect for human life must be extended to respect for all creation. The ethical significance of global interdependence and the common good calls for an ethics of solidarity promoting cooperation and a just structure of sharing and caring for the poor and the earth. While the universal purpose of created things require equitable and responsible use of the earth's resources, the option for the poor offers us a direction for gradual and integral progress with an authentic and a sustainable economy, human dignity, and justice.²⁵

Everyone must recognize her/his obligation to contribute to the restoration of a healthy environment and humanity. We need to realize our responsibility within creation and our duty towards the human community, nature and the Creator. Our efforts to defend the dignity and rights of the poor and of workers, to use the strength of our market economy to meet basic human needs, and to press for greater national and global economic justice are linked to efforts to preserve and sustain the earth. These are not distinct and separate issues but complementary challenges.

²⁵United States Catholic Conference, "Catholic Social Teaching and Environmental Ethics," <http://www.webofcreation.org/DenominationalStatements/catholic.htm> (accessed 26.10.2015).