

## A PATH TO A SYNODAL INTEGRAL ECOLOGY: BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVES

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### **Abstract**

This article discusses the synodal path that Pope Francis suggested as a potential way towards holistic ecology, starting with the biblical concept of ecological stewardship. The primary objective is to study a few biblical texts that aid in the development of an eco-theology of mission and participation. The Bible advocates for a harmonious relationship between God, humanity, and creation, with humans as stewards responsible for caring for the earth. This stewardship reflects an integral and synodal approach, emphasising the interconnectedness of all creation. Pope Francis emphasises that human life is interconnected with all creation, forming a universal family. Ecological wisdom and conversion are crucial for sustaining the planet,

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necessitating practical action plans at grassroots levels to foster ecological balance and care for the earth as part of Christian living.

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A few days ago, I was on a campus surrounded by hills, trees and the serenity of Nature with very few vehicular movements. An ecological serenity, where one feels relaxed and quiet within, somehow one feels encompassed by the freshness of the pure air of the hillocks. Early in the morning, I could hear the music of Nature, all types of birds singing their morning tunes. I saw the morning star fading away, the rays of the Sun from the East, streaming in through the crevices of the hills. From a distance, I saw a motorbike moving; otherwise, it was only the symphony of Nature!!

I tried to listen to the same thing in Bangalore! What I hear more is the noise of vehicles rushing; I can still hear the morning songs of a few birds; the morning star is hardly visible due to pollution; there is no chance of seeing the rays of the rising Sun. The serenity and calm of the ecological balance at the hill station is practically a miss here in the city. These contrasting experiences indicate the gap between the ideal and the real in ecology. As I add the last few thoughts to this article, I can feel the impact of climate change in Bangalore, which was once known for its lakes, green alleys, and temperate climate, and which was once known as the Pensioners' Paradise. Now, the reality has changed:

- Lakes are dwindling.
- The Summer has been hotter than ever.
- Water sources are drying up.
- The city is reeling from a severe drought.

Consequently, climate change becomes an electoral issue, and a question is suggested to be asked to the parliamentary candidates when approached for a vote: "What do you think the central government can do to retain the beautiful weather of Namma Bengaluru?"<sup>1</sup> It is a way of projecting the situation as tailor-made to engender apathy about the fate of the city dwellers while closing one's eyes on our individual and collective responsibility in sustaining the beauty of our habitat. Often, we tend to feature a diffusion of

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<sup>1</sup> Srinivas Alavalli, "A Guide to Picking your MP," *Deccan Herald* (Saturday, April 13, 2024): 2.

responsibility.<sup>2</sup> This diffusion of responsibility and this lopsidedness in the creative vs. destructive actions of the individual or society bring in a large-scale tragedy like extreme weather as of now. What can we do in the face of such an inescapable ecological crisis? Synodality is the key! Collective effort and collective responsibility can be the winning mantra.

In this article, I shall try to relate the Synodal path proposed by Pope Francis to the biblical vision of ecological stewardship as a possible route towards integral ecology. The main focus will be on listening to some biblical texts that help us develop an eco-theology of participation and mission.

### **Stewardship versus Dominion**

The Bible has many ecological thoughts, both theoretical and practical. In my opinion, the ideal situation of Paradise with the utopic paradisiacal harmonious and symbiotic co-existence and pro-existence between God and the created elements with human beings as the attorneys of the creator is a critique of the dystopia of assorted and fragmented attitudes of humanity towards both the creator and Nature, with all its network of interdependent relationships. When considering stewardship to be the way towards a synodal integral ecology based on the Bible, I tend to state that the basic ecological vision of the Bible is both synodal and integral if we take the path of stewardship. It is used here as an ethical value of the altruistic attitude of human beings towards God's creation, paying paramount attention to respecting and safeguarding the creator's intention for a symbiotic relationship among the triad, creator-humanity-Nature. Stewardship implies trusteeship. A steward is entrusted with the responsibility of managing the ownership of another person. Thus, ecological stewardship refers to the responsibility invested in human beings, as trustees, to care for God's creation. However, as Edwards points out, the language of stewardship should not be interpreted to imply that human beings are a necessary intermediary between God and other creatures; suggesting that they do not have an independent existence or relationship without humans. Thus, ecological stewardship can be

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<sup>2</sup> Natural resources like biodiversity, clean air, fresh water and favourable climate are common goods that we enjoy as blessings. When an individual or an institution fling their wastage into them, they enjoy all the paybacks of free waste disposal, but the effect of pollution is thrust on everyone. In the same way, the effort of one individual or an institution to clean up the environment benefits everyone equally, not just those making the effort.

better understood as a divine invitation to cultivate and care for creation, fostering a kinship relationship with God's creation. "As called to cultivate and take care of creation, human beings are part of the unfolding of creation, called to participate responsibly in the dynamism of ongoing creation. We are intimately linked to the life-forms of our planet and to the atmosphere, the soil, and the oceans."<sup>3</sup>

### **"Image and Likeness" - The Ideal of being Human**

Human beings, created in the image and likeness of God with shared power to take care of creation, is the ideal set for integral ecology. Psalm 8 dwells vividly on this critical shared responsibility. The poet of this psalm, reflecting on the role of human beings in relation to God, the creator, and the rest of creation, realises that independent of God, human beings are insignificant. Hence, the pertinent question is: "What are human beings that you are mindful of, mortals that you care for? (Ps 8:4 NRS)" The human role becomes pivotal only if it is considered in relation to God's creative power. In other words, only when humans become aware that they are important because of God's gratuitous sharing of his creative power with them by crowning them with "glory and honour (*kabod wehadar*) (v.5)." These two attributes, divine prerogatives elsewhere associated with Yahweh or royal rulers, are now expanded to include humanity as a whole. This sharing is in view of entrusting them with the responsibility of taking care of the rest of creation. It indicates that the role expected of humans is royal, having a cosmic dimension. Their role is to be masters within the created universe. It is a kingly role, but according to the manner of God himself. The dominion entrusted to humanity is special. It is based on the power of God, who establishes power from babes and the weak (Ps 8:3). As Jacobson writes, "God has placed all things under our feet not so that we may walk all over them, but so that we might tend and care for them, as Adam was instructed to do in the garden."<sup>4</sup> Man must exercise his power by living in

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<sup>3</sup> Dennis Edwards, *Ecology at the Heart of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006), 25-26.

<sup>4</sup> Nancy de Claisse-Walford, Rolf A. Jacobson and Beth LaNeel Tanner, *The Book of Psalms*, The New International Commentary of the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MN: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 127.

reverence of God. The ideal portrayed by Psalm 8 is “a model of co-dependency and stewardship of creation.”<sup>5</sup>

This idea is also depicted in the creation accounts in the book of Genesis: man and woman are placed on equal footing to walk together with the creator and the rest of creation, respecting one another and their specific roles (Gen 1:26-28). The ideal situation of harmonious co-existence of God the creator, humanity and the rest of creation narrated in the Paradise story was never a reality but probably a utopic vision humanity aspires to achieve amidst the dystopia of an incongruous and disturbing relationship among the three. The reality or dystopia is humanity’s careless and contemptuous attitude towards the flora and fauna of the earth as if it were the creator and owner of creation, while the truth is that it is merely a part of creation. The maximum it can claim is the special role entrusted to it as the steward and trustee.

The creation accounts in the book of Genesis present the original intent of God’s creation, which was thwarted by human infringements. They indicate the responsibility vested with humans as intended by the creator, often misunderstood or misinterpreted to the advantage of humans. As Klaus Westermann points out, what the first creation account communicates in a nutshell about the creation of human beings derives from the fact “that the uniqueness of human beings consists in their being God’s counterparts. The relationship to God is not something which added to human existence; humans are created in such a way that their very existence is intended to be their relationship to God.”<sup>6</sup> This relationship is the basis for the mission entrusted to humans to have dominion (*radah*) over the animal species and to subdue (*kabash*) the earth by filling it (1:26, 28).

What can be done to restore the lost harmony in the actuality of ecological disruptions? It depends much on correctly understanding and implementing the two missions entrusted to humans, *radah* and *kabash*.

The verbs “to have dominion (*radah*)” and “to subdue (*kabash*)” in Gen 1:26 and 28 have given rise to many interpretations. In the past, they were wrongly taken to mean an absolute power given to humans

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<sup>5</sup> Susan Gillingham, *Psalms Through the Centuries: A Reception History Commentary on Psalms 1-72*, Wiley Blackwell Bible Commentaries (Oxford: John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2018), 82.

<sup>6</sup> Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11, A Continental Commentary* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1994), 158.

to deal with creation wantonly according to their whims and fancies to benefit them, without considering the Creator's intent and the right of animals and plants to exist on their own. Now, most scholars agree that these verbs, semantically parallel, do not imply subjection by force but rather putting the earth to creative use.<sup>7</sup>

Dominion does not mean to exploit them, but to rule over them or to control them so as to safeguard human existence when threatened by wild animals. The restricted sense of dominion as stewardship is clear from the mandate given: Human beings are not even given the right to kill those living beings entrusted to their dominion.<sup>8</sup> If image and likeness is a kingly role given to humankind, which distinguishes it from the rest of creation, it is expected to live this role by remaining obedient, as male and female, to the divine purposes of creation.<sup>9</sup> As Zobel notes succinctly:

Human dominion, limited to the earth and animal kingdom, derives from being made in the image of God and is understood as an aspect of God's blessing. It follows necessarily that human dominion is a power bestowed by God and must serve to maintain God's order. Human rule must have positive consequences for the ruled; in ruling humans must preserve their humanity and remain humane. Therefore, human dominion can be understood only as an action for which humans are accountable to God... Human dominion over earth should therefore contribute to the preservation and benefit of God's creation.<sup>10</sup>

In other words, the role of humans in God's image is to represent God, the creator, in safeguarding and promoting the harmony and order of creation through the correct use of the power granted to them. Gen 2:15 explains the dominion as stewardship through the verbs "serve" (*abad*) and "keep" (*shamar*). Both of these verbs connote a loving and responsible attitude and do not imply the arrogant supremacy of competition and power display.<sup>11</sup> These verbs, together with Gen 1:27-28 imply that the human being is "both responsible and

<sup>7</sup> H.-J. Zobel, "*rada*," *TDOT*: 13, 335.

<sup>8</sup> Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, 159.

<sup>9</sup> Michael A. Bullmore, "The Four Most Important Biblical Passages for a Christian Environmentalism," *Trinity Journal* 19 NS (1998), 156: "The rule that men and women are to exercise over creation, then, is one of servanthood, as a brother or sister "rules" over others in the family."

<sup>10</sup> Zobel, "*rada*," 335-336.

<sup>11</sup> E. Carpenter, *abad*, *NIDOTTE*: 3, 304-305. See also R.L. Sarkar, *The Bible, Ecology and Environment*, Delhi: ISPCK, 2000, 139-162.

dependent on earth.”<sup>12</sup> The ecological ideal mentioned in Gen 2:15, as a friendly attitude towards the earth is indicative of the utopia of a synergetic human engagement with the earth, respecting it and keeping it from all damage. However, the actuality or dystopia of the tense relationship between humans and the earth is expressed in the reclusive effect of sin on human toil in Gen 3:17-19. The disrupted reciprocity between human toil and the soil expressed as a curse in Gen 3:17-19 betrays the non-communicative effect of going against the divine intent of creation. Gerhard von Rad’s commentary on Gen 3:17-19 rightly emphasises this: “A solidarity of creation existed between man and the ground. But a break occurred in this affectionate relationship, an alienation that expresses itself in a silent, dogged struggle between man and soil... The passage touches on unfathomable relationships between man and earth.”<sup>13</sup>

The earth producing thorns and thistles instead of the expected grain or fruits refers to the strained relationship between human beings and the soil. The Book of Job understands the earth producing thorns and thistles as a judgement of God on ecological injustice when Job says, “If my land has cried out against me, and its furrows have wept together; if I have eaten its yield without payment, and caused the death of its owners; let thorns grow instead of wheat, and foul weeds instead of barley” (Job 31:38-40\* NRS).

### **Subduing as Protection**

The word “subdue (*kabas*)” associated with military conquest of chaos and disorder, used in Gen 1:28, is in no way to be interpreted as having this sense in humanity’s attitude to Nature, as if to deal with the earth as an enemy or as if creation is chaos.<sup>14</sup> Rather, it is to be understood in the sense of mastering the art of keeping in control the forces that can jeopardise the order of creation; the art of stewardship and trusteeship respecting the divine intent of the creative order. Elsewhere, the duty entrusted to Adam is “to till and keep the land” (Gen 2:14). The implication is that human beings are masters of God’s creation, entrusted with the royal responsibility of controlling it from disintegration for the sake of human survival and simultaneously, as

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<sup>12</sup> Kristin M. Swenson, “Care and Keeping East of Eden: Gen 4:1-16 in Light of Gen 2-3,” *Interpretation* 60.4 (2006): 376.

<sup>13</sup> Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis*, Old Testament Library (Westminster: John Knox Press, 1979), 94-95.

<sup>14</sup> William P. Brown, “Genesis and Job: A Cosmic Conversation in Conflict,” *Interpretation* 77 (2023): 10.

its caretakers, having the responsibility for its wellbeing.<sup>15</sup> The Wisdom of Solomon puts it succinctly: the dominion given to human beings is for ruling the world in holiness and justice (Wis 9:1-3). Unchecked human interference with Nature without respecting the God-created ecological balance is an anti-steward attitude that causes environmental disorders. As a result, the synodal path of harmonious and friendly co-existence between humans and ecosystems is in peril, and many species have become victims of humanity's ecological violence.<sup>16</sup>

In a way, the ideal suggested by the creation accounts in Genesis is that there is a place on this earth for every living being, both small and great. Humans are destined to have a pivotal role in deciding their destiny in an interdependent existence with them. This interdependence is expressed through the words "have dominion over," "to till and keep," or, better, "to till and serve" this creation. To keep the ideal of interdependent environmental existence and to have our destiny in harmony with the integrity of creation<sup>17</sup> as our mission, the synodal path of listening to, and walking together with Nature is a must. As the flood story indicates, the ecological attitude recommended by the Bible is the ethic of active caring of all living beings.<sup>18</sup> Ultimately, the biblical perspective on ecology is that, "God's good earth is the dwelling place, not only for humans but also for all creatures, great and small, "useful" to us or not," and that "there is no biblical warrant for degrading the earth or destroying other life species."<sup>19</sup>

However, based on this, it may be an exaggeration to argue that no animal should be killed for food, protection or security. In this regard, one should consider the logic of the food chain existing in creation. It may also be incorrect to place animals on par with humans because, biblically speaking, we notice a hierarchical placing of equality among human beings as male and female, as different from the role given to

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<sup>15</sup> Richard H. Hiers, "Ecology, Biblical Theology, and Methodology: Biblical Perspectives on the Environment," *Zygon* 19.1 (1984): 48. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9744.1984.tb00566.x>

<sup>16</sup> Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Laudate Deum* (now on *LD*), §§4-15 [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/apost\\_exhortations/documents/20231004-laudate-deum.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/apost_exhortations/documents/20231004-laudate-deum.html)

<sup>17</sup> Holmes Rolston, III, "The Bible and Ecology," *Interpretation* 50 (1996): 16-26.

<sup>18</sup> Hiers, "Ecology, biblical theology, and methodology," 51-52.

<sup>19</sup> Hiers, "Ecology, biblical theology, and methodology," 55-56.



humans to have dominion over animal species.<sup>20</sup> Absolute ecological egalitarianism, which claims equal value for creatures and denies any special value for humans is also untenable from a biblical standpoint. "In abandoning the uniqueness of human beings made in the image of God, it undermines a powerful source of ecological commitment. Human beings have a unique moral responsibility towards other creatures. There is a unique moral demand made upon them to respond urgently, creatively and wisely to the ecological crisis they have created."<sup>21</sup> The dominion and subduing also imply proper governance to oversee and control the animals so that they may not become a menace and a threat to the peaceful life of human beings.<sup>22</sup>

With this biblical vision of the interrelated existence of human beings with the creator and the rest of creation, let us now explore the Synodal path towards an integrated ecology.

### **Listening to Nature's Language**

Nature has a language. But more sensitive eardrums and better perception are needed to decipher Nature's language and respond to its cry. Psalm 19 speaks of the communicative strategy of Nature, using a meta-human language. Psalm 19 can be best understood as a Wisdom poem with ecological motives. As Jon Howell notes, "If wisdom is to 'revive the soul' and 'enlighten the eyes' it must connect with and live within the natural order of things."<sup>23</sup>

The heavens are telling the glory of God;  
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.  
Day to day pours forth speech,  
and night to night declares knowledge.  
There is no speech, nor are there words;  
their voice is not heard;  
yet their voice goes out through all the earth,  
and their words to the end of the world (Ps 19:1-4).

It is the voice of the universe created by God and present on all the earth, using its mode of communication from day to day and night to

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<sup>20</sup> Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, 158.

<sup>21</sup> Dennis Edwards, *Ecology at the Heart of Faith*, 22.

<sup>22</sup> See, Edwards, *Ecology at the Heart of Faith*, 20.

<sup>23</sup> John Howell, "Psalm 19 Relating the natural order with the Torah's wisdom," *Theology* 112. 868 (2009): 248.

night. This wordless communication entails God's universal glory (*kabod*), revealed in heaven and on earth (cf. Ps 8). The heavens and the firmament are the handiwork of God, the sublime artist. Nature has a knowledge of God, which is communicated to the universe in a special way; it is a powerful communication of the creative power (*kabod*) of God, manifested in the beauty and order of the universe by filling the whole universe (heaven and the earth). (Isa 6:3); without the medium of human communication. Thus, Nature, with its divinely entrusted communicative function, invites humans to respectfully listen to the Divine glory manifested in the creative order of the universe. In this way, respecting and fostering integral Ecology becomes an art of singing hallelujah; praising God's glory revealed in Nature and becoming an ecological prayer.

For an integral ecology, we need to develop a better listening strategy to understand this language because this language is more understandable through seeing and recognising than hearing. What this language communicates is the order of God's creation. Since the beginning of creation, this language has been universally valid in consistently pointing to the Creator God's glory.<sup>24</sup>

For an integral ecology, we first need to proclaim the power of this language and train people to understand it. It is of utmost importance to pay due respect to the "handiwork of God" while praising Him. Failure to acknowledge the cries of the ailing order of God's creation is an act of sheer injustice.

Commenting on the speechless communication of Nature, Howell makes an important observation regarding integral ecology. It indicates the limitations of human knowledge in general and of various branches of study in particular. It points to the fact "that no one system of thinking or discipline can be independently complete or absolute. One implication is that the search for knowledge must be interdisciplinary. Neither science nor theology has exclusive access to the truth." If we apply this to the metaphor of the meta-human communicative function of Nature given in Ps 19, we can say that theology and science have limits in grasping the glory of God revealed in God's creative order. Hence, each has to be humble enough to listen to the voice of the other. "At the boundaries, there are enigmas and puzzles that are gaps in our knowledge and provide a motivation to

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<sup>24</sup> Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Die Psalmen I*, NEB (Würzburg: Echter, 1993), 132.

search further.” Hence, more and more interdisciplinary approaches are needed between theology and science to develop an integral ecology and address the crisis of climate change.<sup>25</sup>

### **Praying with Nature**

Ps 150 further illustrates the need to include Nature in our prayer culture. It concludes the language of ecological praise we have already seen in Psalm 19. Ps 150 speaks of the merging of two horizons, the earthly and the heavenly, in proclaiming the glory of God manifested in the mighty deeds of God (v.2). In the language of the Psalms, as Zenger notes, “the mighty deeds (*geburot*)” of Yahweh encompass not only all the actions in creation and history on behalf of his people Israel but also the accomplishment of this world order in the face of all the powers of chaos.<sup>26</sup>

Naturally, humans have to play their part correctly in keeping the melody of the cosmic concert chorally harmonious through prayer and action. The ecological tone of Psalm 150 is very evident.

The final verse of the book of Psalms, Ps 150:6, draws attention to the crucial need for an ecological balance and a universal hallelujah: “Let *everything* that breathes praise the LORD! Praise the LORD!” Does this verse offer an open invitation to broaden the scope of prayer to encompass all living beings, including plants, animals and humans, in a gathering of ecological synodality; or is it an invitation specifically to entire humanity to praise the Lord by keeping a right relationship with the creator and the rest of creation? Erich Zenger believes that “all breath (*neshamah*)” in v.6 is to be understood as referring only to human beings. However, many commentators see all breath as referring not only to humans but also to other living beings which live and breathe (e.g., Gen 7:22). In my opinion, there is nothing wrong with understanding the last verse of the Psalter as expanding the horizon of praise to God’s creative power inclusively. Joining Konrad Schaefer, I would say, “The last line of the Psalter, addressed to all creatures, invites a simultaneity of praise with life.”<sup>27</sup>

At the same time, the use of the word *neshamah* to refer to breath also indicates a difference between humans and the rest of the elements

<sup>25</sup> Howell, “Psalm 19 Relating the natural order with the Torah’s wisdom,” 249-250.

<sup>26</sup> Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Psalm 3: A Commentary on Psalms 101-150*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2011), 663-664.

<sup>27</sup> Konrad Schaefer, *Psalms*, Berit Olam (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001), 345.

that breathe. While *ruah* is generally used for breath to humans and animals, *neshamah* refers only to God and human beings. This understanding helps us to keep the commonality of human beings with and also the distinction from the rest of creation, and to situate our responsibility in a synodal networking with them.

Ravasi's commentary on Ps 150 highlights these aspects well. According to him, humans are vested with *ruah*, "spirit" like animals, but also have *neshamah*, self-awareness, relating them to God. The human breath of life called self-consciousness, which is different from that of animals, can become prayer and praise and take us to a full communion with God. Moreover, with us, we can take along all that breathe. Since human beings are placed in a dialogical relationship with the creator and the rest of creation, only they can glorify God through creation. Nature appears to be a great sibling of humanity that helps those who desire to join with it in praising God's glory.<sup>28</sup>

In other words, Nature cannot be regarded as something separate from ourselves or as a mere setting in which we live. We are a part of Nature, included in it and thus constantly interacting with it.

The ecological vision of Ps 150 promotes integral ecology in a synodal way. As we know, singing hallelujah is possible only when shalom exists and wellbeing results from the harmony of relationships. The universal praise envisaged in Psalm 150 is possible only when humanity recognises its interrelated and interdependent existence with Nature and the rest of creation. The more ecological harmony, the better the cosmic hallelujah. As we are witnessing a growing tension in human relationships with Nature, the human agency of praising God involving Nature is in peril and, in a way, impossible. It weakens the vision of Ps 150:6 to have a hallelujah of integral ecology resulting from the synodal co-existence of all that breathes. Only when we promote this co-existence, can hallelujah as "to give thanks to the divine creator who sustains all life and upholds the world" become truly liturgical.<sup>29</sup> In other words, only through our earnest attempt to improve our relationship with all that breathes can we make the symphony of cosmic hallelujah of all living beings, a universal praise to the creator. This universal inclusiveness in prayer can help to develop a synodal vision, as Pope Francis says, "to look at the world

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<sup>28</sup> Gianfranco Ravasi, *Il libro dei salmi : commento e attualizzazione, volume 3 (101-150)* (Bologna: Edizione Dehoniane, 1985), 1006.

<sup>29</sup> Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 3*, 664-665.

from within," as a partner and an insider.<sup>30</sup> Naturally, it implies also listening to the cry of protest by Nature and creating a new culture of recognising, as *Laudate Deum* says, "that human life is incomprehensible and unsustainable without other creatures" and realising that human beings, together with other creatures, form a universal family.<sup>31</sup>

There was a time when poets like Wordsworth were criticised for thinking more of Nature than of man and were recommended to think less of sunsets, of autumn, of the expansive dissolution in Nature, of the oneness of man and Nature, and to emphasise the contrary; the insignificance of the inanimate world in comparison with man, the godlike ruler of the earth; the difference between man and Nature, and the gulf which separates them.<sup>32</sup> It is however clear by now that any anthropocentric understanding of creation is dangerous without respecting the interdependent and inclusive existence of humans with the rest of creation. The more we recognise the significance of the inanimate world for the survival of the human species, the better our eco-sensitivity and ecological wisdom. What we need is to develop an "ecological theology of human beings in relation to other creatures."<sup>33</sup>

It is the theology that recognises the rest of creation as groaning in travail with us for adoption and redemption by the power of the Risen Lord (Rm 8:22-23). As Pope Francis says in *Laudate Deum*, the lack of a synodal way of listening to the cries of protest on the part of Nature through signals of extreme weather phenomena and a disdainful attitude towards environmental alarm bells are expressions of a lack of ecological stewardship.<sup>34</sup>

Hence, we need to think about rectifying the broken shalom. There is an urgency for a reversal in our collective attitude toward Nature because it signals systemic failure to respect the dignity of our common home. This change of attitude includes abandoning the deriding attitude towards those who speak of global warming, trivialising the increasing ecological disasters as nothing unusual but part of the period of cooling and warming of the planet, and taking genuine

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<sup>30</sup> *LD*, §25.

<sup>31</sup> *LD*, §67.

<sup>32</sup> Barry Cerf, "Wordsworth's Gospel of Nature," *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 37.4 (1922): 615-638.

<sup>33</sup> Edwards, *Ecology*, 21.

<sup>34</sup> *LD*, §§5-6.

political decisions to reduce the human causes of these alarmingly increased ecological disasters due to climate change.<sup>35</sup>

### **Imparting Ecological Wisdom**

Part of this stewardship of an integral-ecology rests with the people in responsible positions in imparting correct information on ecology and the role of human beings in sustaining or destroying the ecological balance. Prophet Hosea accuses the priests of failing to provide a correct knowledge of God to the people entrusted to them, thus causing disorder and cries of the land (Hos 4:1-3). It points to the priestly duty of imparting ecological wisdom in their ministry of proclamation of the Good News. From an ecological perspective, a correct knowledge of God implies respecting the creator's intentions for creation and fostering the inherent order he has placed in it. It is to recognise that the biblical vision of creation is a harmonious, interrelated existence, where the human being is a team-player with a pivotal role. It is to instruct the people that tampering with the God-created order of Nature and the environment, whether large or small, is an injustice that makes the earth suffer and groan. It also includes speaking of ecological repentance and conversion and the need to act mercifully to repair the enormous damage we have caused to Nature and the environment through our ecological sins.

Right from the beginning of his papacy, Pope Francis has been keen to exercise his teaching authority, focusing on our interrelated co-existence with Nature and the need to include care for planet Earth, our common home, as an essential component of Christian faith-living. But it has not yet been translated into practical action-plans at the grassroots level to register any marked impact on ecological conversion. What I see as a must for fostering an integral ecology in the Church is a more committed engagement from pastors and catechists to bring in the urgency of ecological initiatives as a part of being a Christian. It is to be insisted on that damaging the environment is a structural sin. Those in responsible administrative positions in the Church should work towards more and more interdisciplinary initiatives to find practical and scientific solutions for reversing the climate and environmental damages we have done and to initiate a healing process for the planet Earth and its ecosystems.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> LD, §§6-19.

<sup>36</sup> See for such an initiative, Pamela Fernandes and Luke Mendes, eds., *Laudato Si': In Continuum the Asian Outreach*.

## **Conclusion**

The Bible has a sound vision of ecological existence. However, it has to be correctly understood as an interrelated and interdependent co-existence of human beings, the creator and the rest of creation. The pivotal role intended for human beings in God's creation is being its steward, taking care of it and respecting God's plan. A synodal understanding of integral ecology invites us to listen to the meta-human communication of Nature and to include the language of Nature in our prayer culture. A synodal approach to integral ecology warrants us to abandon exclusive claims, be they theological or scientific, to solve the ecological issue we are in, and to adopt an interdisciplinary approach respecting each other, giving due credit to theology and science and working together towards practical solutions through ecological conversion in thought and praxis.

## **Practical Steps:**

1. Make a biblical vision of the harmony of creation through human participation in making the environment cleaner and healthier a part of Sunday homilies and prayer gatherings.
2. Develop a prayer culture that includes ecology: listening to its voices.
3. Catechism and Theology courses must include Ecology as a subject.
4. Promoting organic farming and sustainable agriculture in our institutions, parishes and houses will do more justice to the Biblical Vision of stewarding Nature.
5. Controlling any pollution that might arise in the environment entrusted to our care and stewardship should receive immediate attention.
6. Waste management systems should be made more scientific and effective in our institutions and parishes.
7. Our spiritual exercises and worship practices should include awareness-creating meditations and retreats to inculcate the biblical vision of stewarding Nature and its more profound implications.
8. Ecological education can be a part of the value education curriculum in all our educational institutions (from preprimary to universities).

9. Various feasts in the parishes and celebrative events in the institutions should be conducted in a way that does not harm Nature, which must be stewarded.
10. When new construction projects are planned, those responsible shall see to it that an environmental feasibility study is done properly so as not to harm Nature. Any loss or damage to vegetation or flora and fauna during the phases of construction shall be seriously compensated with extra cultivation of plants and trees on the same land.