

CELEBRATION OF LIFE'S RELATIONALITY: A WAKE-UP CALL FOR INTEGRAL ECOLOGY

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Abstract

This article is an invitation to celebrate life's relationships at all levels and stages towards the dawn of integral ecology, taking into account all forms of life, including human beings, and fulfilling the priestly ministry of praise and thanks for the excellent creation. It discusses celebrating life's relationality from an integral ecological perspective, drawing attention to three interrelated insights: integral ecology, celebration of triadic relations, and celebration of life. The article explores how life relationships are celebrated based on the triadic realities of God-creation-human beings: rootedness to the creation, relatedness with people, and oneness in God. The author calls for celebrating integral ecology through discovering the mystery of life, gaining mastery of oneself, and becoming a mystic on the move. Being a mystic bestows a beautiful blending of mystery and mastery and promotes the celebration of life's relationality, contents the author.

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Life is a wave of beauty formed by myriads of relationships. We are what our relationships are; as our relationships, so is our life. The relationship is the key to life and its prosperity, for life depends on elements of the universe. Life thrives where relationships are recognised, respected, and responded to, irrespective of their forms and levels. An exception to this rule of life and relationships is neither indisputable nor inconceivable.

Everything is interconnected, visibly or invisibly. Whatever, whenever, wherever, whoever, however, one does impact something, sometimes, somewhere, someone, and somehow. Inherent interrelationship to all is the grammar and literature of life. *Laudato Sí* reiterates it, “what takes place in any one area can have a direct or indirect influence on other areas” (LS 142). The ripple effect illustrates this life dynamic; a small change can enormously affect a chain of events and things.

Life is a celebration, and celebration is the sign of life; life is an epiphany of the celebration of relationships the community treasures and transmits daily. Life is the celebration’s foundation, force, and focus, and vice versa; one mirrors the other. Both life and celebration spring from relationships. In His providence, God, the source of life, love, and light, has a beautiful, all-inclusive plan for the whole world. The dream of God is the world’s flourishing – flowering of all forms of life in the garden of God, in its own space and time. From the beginning, in the eyes of the Divine, the world and everything in it were “good.” In the course of history, God sent Jesus to save the world to the status of having “eternal life,” and Jesus, in turn, sent his disciples to “preach the Gospel to the whole creation” so that the dawn of the celebration of all would be in the presence of the Lord with the people of God in the “new earth and new heaven.” The story of salvation is the narrative of the celebration of life, rooted in, branched out, flowering and bearing fruits through the season of manifold relationships.

Thomas Berry nurtured an earth’s dream. He advocated “biocracy,” a rule and rhythm promoting the celebration of all forms of life at every stage. For the emergence of an “ecozoic era,” Berry calls for “a spiritual discipline that involves a change from our anthropocentrism to a

biocentrism and geocentrism. It will even require a move from democracy to biocracy.”¹ Berry insists on the urgency of developing an inner discipline. He observes, “We want to control the very structure and functioning of the natural world. We want air conditioning in summer. We want heating in winter. We do not want to experience heat, we do not want to experience cold.”²

Local, national and international discussions and summits happen at various levels to curb the rampant ecological exploitation in every realm of life, often orchestrated by false propaganda of progress and development. It is like a ticking bomb that could go off at any time in our courtyard, for we are often unaware of it or negligent of the impending peril. Sallie McFague compares ecological deterioration to nuclear extinction, a “quick kill” to “slow death.” “Ecological deterioration is subtle and gradual: it involves the daily, seemingly innocuous, activities of every person on the planet.”³ She illustrates the recurring danger with another imagery of alcoholic addiction. “Like addiction, ecological deterioration is insidious . . . We become so used to diminishment, so used to environmental decay, that we can deny that it is occurring.”⁴

Based on the human experience of climate change and its corollaries, people from all walks of life talk about advocating sustainable development and fostering an ecosystem, both living and life-giving. “We allow machines to think for us, work for us, and give us space for comfort. Yet, in our relentless pursuit of progress, we do not have enough leisure to enjoy the earth’s bounties as we move towards our destruction. As we seek to conquer our environment, it will, in the end, conquer us.”⁵ He observes the present ecological scenario, “We are facing an ecological holocaust that may result in human disaster.”⁶ Sibal captures the fact of the matter on the grounds and directs our attention to living a life of hope, happiness, and

¹ Thomas Berry with Thomas Clarke, *Befriending the Earth. A Theology of Reconciliation Between Humans and the Earth*, eds. Stephen Dunn and Anne Lonergan, Mystic: Twenty-Third Publications, 1991, 116.

² T. Berry with T. Clarke, *Befriending the Earth*, 149.

³ Sallie McFague, *The Body of God. An Ecological Theology*, London: SCM Press, 1993, 2.

⁴ S. McFague, *The Body of God*, 3.

⁵ Kapil Sibal, “Of Men & Machines: Challenges for the Emerging World,” (accessed 03 Feb 2024). <https://www.newindianexpress.com/opinions/2024/Feb/03/of-men-machines-challenges-for-the-emerging-world>.

⁶ K. Sibal, “Of Men & Machines”.

harmony, “Can progress be measured solely by economic and technological growth even though unsustainable, or should it also encompass human welfare, environmental sustainability and social harmony?”⁷ The answer is obvious: we need sustainable developmental goals and corresponding programmes to help people celebrate their lives and relationships.

Similarly, sensitising the impending ecological disaster, Amar Patnaik urges the forthcoming general elections to go for a “green election” to curb the growing death of environmental wellness, “The green transition must involve all stakeholders such as political parties, Election Commissions, governments, voters, the media, and civil society. The success of integrating top-level directives with grassroots initiatives to foster a green transition is imperative.”⁸ Furthermore, Patnaik recommends, “Embracing eco-conscious electoral practices can help India set an example for other democracies around the world.”⁹ The courageous step of the Election Commissioner of India in 1999, voicing his concern over the environmental risks associated with using non-biodegradable materials in elections, stands as testimony.

In what follows, I shall discuss celebrating life’s relationality from an integral ecological perspective under three sections: 1) Integral Ecology, 2) Celebration of Triadic Relations, and 3) Celebration of Life.

1. Integral Ecology

The journey to the development of the concept of integral ecology took a few years, culminating in Pope Francis in *Laudato Si*, nevertheless, the gestation of which is seen in the words of John Paul II and maturing in the writings of Benedict VI, especially in *Caritas in Veritate*. An overview of the concept is in order here.

In his message to celebrate the World Day of Peace, John Paul II observed, “Certain elements of today’s ecological crisis reveal its moral character.”¹⁰ He reiterated the essential and mutual interrelatedness of

⁷ K. Sibal, “Of Men & Machines”.

⁸ Amar Patnaik, “Stop the dithering and encourage green elections in India,” (accessed 28 Feb 2024).

“<https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/stop-the-dithering-and-encourage-green-elections-in-india/article67892855.ece>”

⁹ A. Patnaik, “Stop the dithering and encourage green elections in India.”

¹⁰ John Paul II, “Peace with God the Creator, Peace with All of Creation,” Vatican City, 1990, § 6. Cited from “*And God Saw That It Was Good*”. *Catholic Theology and the Environment*, eds Drew Christiansen and Walter Grazer, Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1996, 217.

one thing with others, “we cannot 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.”¹¹ Saving humankind from the threshold of self-destruction, he proposed the fundamental ethical norm, “Respect for life, and above all for the dignity of the human person, is the ultimate guiding norm for any sound economic, industrial or scientific progress.”¹²

Pointing to the integral ecology, though implicitly, John Paul II appeals to theologians, philosophers, and scientists to engage in discovering the order of a harmonious universe, “The human race is called to explore this order, to examine it with due care and to make use of it while safeguarding its integrity.”¹³ Emphasising the urgency of the matter, the author advocates the need for a new solidarity, addressing the structural forms of poverty, a fresh look at human lifestyle, an education in ecological responsibility, and an appreciation of the aesthetic value of creation.¹⁴ “Respect for life and for the dignity of the human person also extends to the rest of creation, which called to join man in praising God (cf. Ps 148:96),”¹⁵ is his ground to appeal for a shared responsibility.

Orchestrating the life and witness of Saint Francis of Assisi, John Paul II concludes his message, “The inspiration of Saint Francis will help us to keep ever alive a sense of “fraternity” with all those good and beautiful things which Almighty God has created.” Friendship with creation becomes the catchword for addressing the ecological crisis.

Pope Benedict XVI undertakes a deeper analysis of the ecological crisis and appeals to people of goodwill for course correction. In his encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*,¹⁶ Benedict XVI analyses the root cause of the ecological crisis in the ignorance or negligence of human ecology:

There is a need for what might be called a human ecology, correctly understood. The deterioration of nature is, in fact, closely connected to the

¹¹ John Paul II, “Peace with God the Creator,” § 6.

¹² John Paul II, “Peace with God the Creator,” § 7.

¹³ John Paul II, “Peace with God the Creator,” § 8.

¹⁴ John Paul II, “Peace with God the Creator,” §§ 10-14.

¹⁵ John Paul II, “Peace with God the Creator,” § 16.

¹⁶ Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, 2009, (accessed on 5 January 2024). https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate.html

culture that shapes human coexistence: when «human ecology» is respected within society, environmental ecology also benefits. Just as human virtues are interrelated, such that the weakening of one places others at risk, so the ecological system is based on respect for a plan that affects both the health of society and its good relationship with nature (CV § 51).

According to Benedict XVI, ecological crisis is connected to human, social, and cultural ecology. All these aspects of reality go hand-in-hand and work for one nature, to which everyone is inherently and intimately related:

The book of nature is one and indivisible: it takes in not only the environment but also life, sexuality, marriage, the family, and social relations: in a word, integral human development. Our duties towards the environment are linked to our duties towards the human person, considered in himself and in relation to others. It would be wrong to uphold one set of duties while trampling on the other. Herein lies a grave contradiction in our mentality and practice today: one which demeans the person, disrupts the environment and damages society (CV § 51).

Benedict XVI invites our attention to the web of relationships which keep a harmonious going and flourishing of all things in nature. Integral human development is a key to addressing the ecological crisis of our time. The compartmentalisation of diverse but integral components of nature and human nature cannot take us to any remedy. Integration and an integral approach to creation and everything in it are paramount to addressing the ecological crisis. As indicated by John Paul II, the ecological crisis is a sign of moral decadence. In the same vein of thought, Benedict XVI argues for an overall moral tenor of society to keep up with environmental ecology:

In order to protect nature, it is not enough to intervene with economic incentives or deterrents; not even an appropriate education is sufficient. These are important steps, but the decisive issue is the overall moral tenor of society. If there is a lack of respect for the right to life and to natural death, if human conception, gestation and birth are made artificial, and if human embryos are sacrificed to research, the conscience of society ends up losing the concept of human ecology and, along with it, that of environmental ecology (LS § 51).

Benedict XVI presents a panoramic picture of the ecological crisis and shows its roots in the human consideration of morality in dealing with human beings, from conception to natural death. Unimaginable manipulations and unbridled exploitations have become trademarks of our culture, which unfortunately but necessarily shoot up in all

areas of life and activities, for we are part of the whole, and the ripple effect is evident in creation. Highlighting the key insights of the encyclical, that is, gratuitousness and transcendence, Benedict XVI, draws our attention to the crucial issue in the ecological crisis:

Truth, and the love which it reveals, cannot be produced: they can only be received as a gift. Their ultimate source is not, and cannot be, mankind, but only God, who is himself Truth and Love. This principle is extremely important for society and for development, since neither can be a purely human product; the vocation to development on the part of individuals and peoples is not based simply on human choice, but is an intrinsic part of a plan that is prior to us and constitutes for all of us a duty to be freely accepted (LS § 52).

Benedict XVI introduces us to God, the source of life and its organic development of the universe. To follow the rhythm of life, we need to pattern our existence and exercise in tune with the plan of God, a guarantee for a harmonious and prosperous life for all. We can trace a close-knit connection between John Paul II's message, "Peace with God the Creator, Peace with All of Creation," with the anchoring of all forms of life in God, the Truth and Love, for the flowering of all on earth by Benedict XVI.

Integral ecology reiterates the interconnectedness and interdependence of every being with all bodies; however insignificant they may look at the first instance, they all make the ecosystem operate rhythmically and dance coherently to make life flourish. Pope Francis is a champion of spearheading the cause of integral ecology, inspired by the life and witness of Saint Francis of Assisi, the Patron of Ecology. Drawing inspiration from St Francis, Pope Francis presents a narrative of an integral ecological¹⁷ paradigm before the world for the consideration of all people of goodwill: He [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, and 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. 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).

Francis sets an image of integral ecology with a face and voice, which is hugely known worldwide for its appeal and attraction.

¹⁷ Francis, *Laudato Si*, 2015, (accessed on 24 March 2016), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html

Integral ecology, therefore, is not abstract and unrealistic. The story of Saint Francis helps Pope Francis illustrate the path of integral ecology:

Francis helps us to see that an integral ecology calls for openness to categories which transcend the language of mathematics and biology, and take us to the heart of what it is to be human. Just as happens when we fall in love with someone, whenever he would gaze at the sun, the moon or the smallest of animals, he burst into song, drawing all other creatures into his praise. He communed with all creation, even preaching to the flowers, inviting them “to praise the Lord, just as if they were endowed with reason”. His response to the world around him was so much more than intellectual appreciation or economic calculus, for to him each and every creature was a sister united to him by bonds of affection. That is why he felt called to care for all that exists. ... If we approach nature and the 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. By contrast, if we feel intimately united with all that exists, then sobriety and care will well up spontaneously. 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).

Pope Francis succeeds in presenting a blueprint for an integral ecological horizon through the life and example of Saint Francis of Assisi. The above paragraph picturesquely draws the areas and avenues to tread on the path of integral ecology, the need of the hour and the difference this approach would offer to our lifestyle and life mission. Integral ecology is essentially human and humane, recognising, respecting and responding to the manifold relationships of human beings with every realm of being in the universe. Another characteristic of integral ecology is its inclusiveness and interdependence among the spheres of life and activity. It engenders wonderment and contemplation of the beauty of creation and the dignity of human beings and their solidarity. It wards off domination, objectification, exploitation, and subjugation of any beings, but it also promotes friendship, stewardship, care, and commitment to contribute to the harmony of life. Integral ecology unfolds a covenant community consciousness among all, where everyone is a sister or brother, including the elements of creation, like earth, water, air, fire, and ether, befriending plants, flowers, fruits, trees, fish, birds, animals, etc. It might be compared to the image of Noah’s arch, where all survive and flourish against all odds in a healthy and harmonious bond.

Integral ecology is a way of life, bonding and building the right relationships in every area of life and activities, however insignificant they appear. Francis elaborates on the proper relationships, stretching them to the research, reporting, design, and planning of technological development:

If we reflect on the proper relationship between human beings and the world around us, we see the need for a correct understanding of work; if we talk about the relationship between human beings and things, the question arises as to the meaning and purpose of all human activity. This has to do not only with manual or agricultural labour but with any activity involving a modification of existing reality, from producing a social report to the design of a technological development (LS § 125).

Integral ecology looks into all possible human interactions and imaginations shaping life in its various forms and stages, for they all contribute to the maintenance and development of an ecosystem, ensuring a holistic programme of life. Nothing is alien to the integral ecological approach, and everything is stitched in proper proportion: plans, figures, flavours, and colours fitting to the canvas of the creation of God. Such lifestyle respects “a concept of the relationship which we can and must have with what is other than ourselves” (LS § 125). While we acknowledge, appreciate, and advance the development of AI, a blessing in disguise, careful management of it must be accompanied by the excellence of human intelligence, the human heart, and the best of art and aesthetics founded on the ethics of life, overarching the virtues of truth, loving-kindness, justice, humility, dignity, equality, liberty, and charity, guided by the Spirit of the Lord.

Considering the interrelatedness of everything, Pope Francis calls for a vision covering every aspect of the global crisis. In the light of an inclusive vision, he suggests a few elements of an integral ecology as a holistic approach. Some of the foundational aspects of integral ecology, according to Francis, are:

1. *Integral ecology is of the whole rather than the piecemeal treatise: “Ecology studies the relationship between living organisms and the environment in which they develop. This necessarily entails reflection and debate about the conditions required for the life and survival of society, and the honesty needed to question certain models of development, production and consumption” (LS § 138).*
2. *Integral ecology stands with interconnectedness, and with fragmentation, it falls: “It cannot be emphasised enough how everything is interconnected. Time and space are not independent of one another,*

and not even atoms or subatomic particles can be considered in isolation.” (LS § 138).

3. *The integral approach works towards ecological harmony, but discrete answers to complex crises fail the project:* “Given the scale of change, it is no longer possible to find a specific, discrete answer for each part of the problem. It is essential to seek comprehensive solutions which consider the interactions within natural systems themselves and with social systems” (LS § 139).
4. *Openness and ongoing research unfold the horizon of ecology:* “Ongoing research should also give us a better understanding of how different creatures relate to one another in making up the larger units which today we term “ecosystems” (LS § 140).
5. *Everything in the world has an intrinsic value independent of their usefulness:* “We take these systems into account not only to determine how best to use them but also because they have an intrinsic value independent of their usefulness. Each organism, as a creature of God, is good and admirable in itself; the same is true of the harmonious ensemble of organisms existing in a defined space and functioning as a system” (LS § 140).
6. *The whole is greater than the part:* “This suggests the need for an «economic ecology» capable of appealing to a broader vision of reality. . . We urgently need a humanism capable of bringing together the different fields of knowledge, including economics, in the service of a more integral and integrating vision” (LS § 141).
7. *The health of a society’s institutions has consequences for ecology and the quality of human life:* “«Every violation of solidarity and civic friendship harms the environment». In this sense, social ecology is necessarily institutional, and gradually extends to the whole of society, from the primary social group, the family, to the wider local, national and international communities” (LS § 142).
8. *What takes place in any one area can have a direct or indirect influence on other areas:* “Thus, for example, drug use in affluent societies creates a continual and growing demand for products imported from poorer regions, where behaviour is corrupted, lives are destroyed, and the environment continues to deteriorate” (LS § 142).
9. *Ecology involves protecting the cultural treasures of humanity:* “It calls for greater attention to local cultures when studying environmental problems, favouring a dialogue between scientific-technical language and the language of the people. Culture is more than what we have inherited from the past; it is also, and above all, a living, dynamic and participatory present reality, which cannot be excluded as we rethink

the relationship between human beings and the environment" (LS § 143).

10. *One size does not fit all*: "Attempts to resolve all problems through uniform regulations or technical interventions can lead to overlooking the complexities of local problems, which demand the active participation of all members of the community. New processes taking shape cannot always fit into frameworks imported from outside; they need to be based in the local culture itself" (LS § 144).
11. *Environmental exploitation and degradation undo the social structures*: "The disappearance of a culture can be just as serious, or even more serious, than the disappearance of a species of plant or animal. The imposition of a dominant lifestyle linked to a single form of production can be just as harmful as the altering of ecosystems" (LS § 145).
12. *Special care for indigenous communities and their cultural traditions*: "They are not merely one minority among others, but should be the principal dialogue partners, especially when large projects affecting their land are proposed. For them, land is not a commodity but rather a gift from God and from their ancestors who rest there, a sacred space with which they need to interact if they are to maintain their identity and values" (LS § 146).
13. *Human ecology matters in the upkeep of a dignified environment*: "It is enough to recognise that our body itself establishes us in a direct relationship with the environment and with other living beings" (LS § 155)
14. *Inclusivity and diversity shape reality*: "Learning to accept our body, to care for it and to respect its fullest meaning, is an essential element of any genuine human ecology. Also, valuing one's own body in its femininity or masculinity is necessary if I am going to be able to recognise myself in an encounter with someone who is different" (LS § 155).
15. *An integral ecology is inseparable from the notion of the common good*: It is "a central and unifying principle of social ethics" (LS 156). "Underlying the principle of the common good is respect for the human person as such, endowed with basic and inalienable rights ordered to his or her integral development" (LS 157). "The principle of the common good immediately becomes, logically and inevitably, a summons to solidarity and a preferential option for the poorest of our brothers and sisters" (LS § 158)

Integral ecology is the heart of the world's inclusive, holistic, and sustainable development, comprised of myriads of realities and relationships founded on reasonability. Celebrating these relationships is the key to the

health and wealth of the world, which will review, renew and revive the values and virtues housed in a culture geared towards transforming people and society.

2. Celebration of Triadic Relations

For an easy grasp and treatise, all possible relationships may be summed up as triadic relationships: the Other, nature, and the Neighbour. The triads are God, creation, and human beings. Towards the realisation of integral ecology, as expounded by Francis in his *Laudato Sí*, it is imperative to attend to these threefold realities and the relationships thereof.

The Liturgy of the Church is the celebration of the manifold relationships the faithful hold dear and central to them. In this sense, the Liturgy houses the theology of the Church, though concise and comprehensive. Take, for instance, the Syro-Malabar Liturgy. The Angelic hymn sung in the Introductory Rite is a beautiful celebration of the triadic relationship.

Following the East Syriac Tradition of the Liturgy, the *Peshitta* version of the Angelic Hymn is typical of these threefold realities and relationships. “Glory to God in the highest [heavens], and on earth peace and good hope for men” (Lk 2:14). The Syro-Malabar Liturgy is a confession and proclamation of the triad: God, earth, and people. The hymn outlines the thrusts of the triadic relationships: glory to God, peace on earth, and hope for people. The horizon of relationships is acknowledged and appreciated as the assembly of the Holy Qurbana (the Eucharistic Liturgy) gathers for worship, thanksgiving, praise, and adoration of God on earth. Setting the stage for the reasonable and acceptable bond, the worshipping community marches towards the liturgical horizon, a mingling of earth and heaven in the liturgical space-time.

The acclamation of the Liturgical assembly, remembering and thanking the Lord God for the Mystery of the Incarnation through the Angelic hymn, enters into the world of salvation offered to humanity in history, the experience of wholeness and wellness. Through the Incarnation of the Word, the world regains the right vision and mission for the world’s flourishing, including human beings. Jesus, through his birth, unfolds a blueprint for a healthy and happy living, which consists of holiness, for the Lord is our peace and joy, “I said these things that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete” (Jn 15:11).

Presenting the roadmap of salvation, the angels sang the hymn of glory to God in the highest, peace on earth, and hope for human beings. Does this hymn not delineate the pathway for inclusive, interdependent, interrelated, and integral life, showcasing the panoramic picture of life in its fullness and interconnectivity of the three spheres of life, a miniature of the horizons of relationships? I think the Angelic hymn portrays a natural and integral relationship for the well-being of all in the world, giving each one dignity through the path of humility, equality, liberty, and charity, for each of the triadic relations purifies, strengthens and enhances the mutual bond through the vision of God for the creation and human beings. Striking a note of harmony among the triadic relationships, one must go through the path of illumination, purification, and communion. While respecting each reality of the triad and its multitudes of realities and relationships, there is no distortion or discrimination of anybody; instead, within the framework of interdependence, everyone contributes to harmonious living, the hallmark of salvation sung in the Angelic hymn.

The celebration of the triadic realities and relationship, the foundation, force, and focus of which is life, may further qualify under three essential orientations or perspectives for further translation of them.

2.1. Rootedness to the Earth

Angels sang the hymn of salvation, marking the birth of Jesus – the Lord with us – but it was for the earth and people. Earth or creation comes first, before the creation of human beings. God has a dream for the earth, occupying a central place in the heart of the divine, which humans cannot dismiss or disregard, for the Lord God saw that everything he created was good. Creation is not an afterthought of God; instead, it is the foundation and frame for the flourishing of the future. Creation, so too the earth, is true, good, and beautiful and marks the genesis of all dreams. Disregarding creation is disrespect for the divine dream. Rediscovering the dream of the earth is a step closer to discerning the divine dream for the whole world.

Human beings, symbolically, come from the earth; they are wedded to the earth, “then the Lord formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being” (Gen 2: 7). Humans cannot exist without creation; the earth may exist even when humans go extinct. The Covid-19 pandemic brings this message naked before our eyes; when women and men

were vulnerable and dying at the outbreak of the pandemic, the earth and the whole creation were thriving, showcasing a salubrious climate. What a terrible reality! It's an unbelievable fact. "For dust you are and to dust you shall return" (Gen 3:19). The dream of the earth continues in the salvation history, "God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (Jn 3:16). Attestation of the earth's significance gathers momentum in Christ, "For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible" (Col 1:16). To keep the dream of the earth going, Jesus commissions his disciples with the mandate "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation" (Mk 16:16). From paradise to Parousia, the dream of the earth carries forward, for there is the manifestation of "a new earth and a new heaven" (Rev 21:1). Furthermore, the dream of the earth is illustrated, "For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed" (Rom 8:19). Besides, the everyday experience, these Scriptural passages illustrate the dream of the earth, and which calls for a closer and deeper understanding of the rootedness of human beings on earth.

Saint Ephrem the Syrian is a champion of the revelation of God, emphasising the merit of Nature and the Scripture. Both Nature and the Scripture are two books of the same revelation.

In *his* book, Moses
 described the creation of the natural world
 so that both Nature and Scripture
 might bear witness to the Creator:
 Nature, through man's use of it,
 Scripture, through his reading of it.
 These are the witnesses
which reach everywhere,
 they are to be found at all times,
 present at every hour,
 confuting the unbeliever
 who defames the Creator.¹⁸

Saint Ephrem, the mystic poet theologian, amply illustrates God's dream for the earth by revealing the divine through creation. Creation

¹⁸ St Ephrem, *The Hymns on Paradise*, 5:2. Introduction and Translation by Sebastian Brock, New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1990, 112-113.

bears witness to the beauty and glory of God. God's mandate to human beings is simple, "to till and keep it" (Gen 2:15) to unravel and augment the beauty of God's garden where they are placed. Landedness is the hallmark of humans. Hence, they are rooted in the earth and made up of the elements of the world, that is, earth, water, air, fire, and ether. Accordingly, in the Indian understanding the human person is made up of different sheathes or koshas: *annamaya*, *pranamaya*, *manomaya*, *vijnanamaya*, and *anandamaya* kosha. These insights into human beings reinstate the idea that there is a radical relationship to the land, which is necessary for the sustainable development of people. Land is one of the partners in the covenantal community consciousness. Human beings have existence and sustainable development only in so far as they are rooted in the earth, the creation of God. Uprooting humans from their radical relationship to the land is the beginning of their destruction and death. Such casualties are visible when people are uprooted, often in the name of development, from their original habitat. Earth is the locus of human flourishing, and humans need to be rooted in the earth. Any genuine answer to the growing ecological crisis has to reiterate the radical relationship of humans with the earth and all it holds for the protection, preservation, promotion, and celebration of life.

2.2. Relatedness with the People

Being rooted in the earth takes us to the plane of human beings. Since they are created in the image and likeness of God, they have an inherent and intimate relationship. They are the children or people of God, sisters and brothers among themselves.

The prayer "Our Father" reflects this fundamental relationship between human beings. This relationship leads us to be stewards of each other, including that of creation. We are the custodians of each other. Cain's infamous reply, "I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper" (Gen 4:9)? The retorting question indirectly points to the admittance of the mutual responsibility of being the custodian. A mindset and attitude of stewardship perpetuated towards human beings will naturally flow into other areas of their relationships, that is, with the creation.

Reflecting the image and likeness of God, human beings show their creativity, caring, service, and self-sacrifice to the world at large. Human beings must assume ministry after the example par excellence of Jesus washing his disciples' feet. Jesus, the Master and Saviour, sets

the example and, in addition, commands us to follow the path of service, “I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you” (Jn 13:15). Loving service is the identifying mark of Christ’s disciples, “As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this, everyone will know that you are my disciples if you love one another” (Jn 13:34-35). Mutual love practised and perpetuated among sisters and brothers as desired by the Master should spontaneously overflow to everything of God, the creation.

The image of God imprinted on human beings makes them to take a wake-up call to take everything in praise and thanksgiving. As Jesus took everything in thanksgiving and praise, everyone is enabled and empowered to raise the whole creation to God in thanksgiving. Every human is a priest who praises and thank the Lord of all his wonderful gifts, especially creation. Being a human means to assume the minister of a priest, who thank, praise, worship and adore the Lord on behalf of all things. A beautiful and meaningful priestly action is available in the second *g’hanta* (inclination) prayer of the Qurbana, a small portion of it is in order here:

Lord of all, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit! The adorable name of Your most Blessed Trinity is worthy of honour from every mouth, thanksgiving from every tongue, and praise from every creature. For, in Your great kindness You created the world and everything in it, and showed humanity Your immense mercy.¹⁹

Assuming the priestly function of humans, the presiding celebrant takes the whole creation in praise, thanks, and worship, highlighting the role and responsibility of every human, a replica of the image of God. The priestly prayer of praise for every human is resounded in the Canticle of Saint Francis, by which he praises the Lord. Priestly prayer of praise and thanksgiving of God for the creation is the fabric of in the Bible:

Let the earth bless the Lord;
let it sing praise to him and highly exalt him forever.
Bless the Lord, mountains and hills;
sing praise to him and highly exalt him forever.
Bless the Lord, all that grows in the ground;
sing praise to him and highly exalt him forever.

¹⁹ *The Order of the Syro-Malabar Qurbana*, Kakkanad: Syro-Malabar Bishop’s Synod, 2005, 50.

Bless the Lord, you springs;
sing praise to him and highly exalt him forever.
Bless the Lord, seas and rivers;
sing praise to him and highly exalt him forever.
Bless the Lord, you whales and all that swim in the waters;
sing praise to him and highly exalt him forever.
Bless the Lord, all birds of the air;
sing praise to him and highly exalt him forever.
Bless the Lord, all wild animals and cattle;
sing praise to him and highly exalt him forever.
Bless the Lord, all people on earth;
sing praise to him and highly exalt him forever (Dan 3:74-82).

The priestly ministry of blessing and praising God for creation after the biblical narrative is the need of the hour to recapture the identity and dignity of the human person, for every woman and man having encountered the creation and its goodness and beauty will start singing the glory of God which in turn, will cement the mutual bonds without exploitation. Humans, therefore, have to put on the mantle of the priesthood of Jesus Christ in thanking the Lord for the wonders of the wisdom of God, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will" (Mt 11:25). Jesus, the High Priest puts things in proper perspective to have relatedness with everyone with trust in God, the Creator of all. "But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow, is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you – you of little faith? Therefore, do not worry about saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?'" (Mt 6:30-31). Recapturing the attitude of thanksgiving, the fundamental disposition of the Eucharistic community, will strengthen people's mutual bond as sisters and brothers and make them happy at the minimum.

The prayer of the offertory in the Latin Liturgy illustrates these triadic relationships coherently:

Blessed are you, Lord God of all creation, for through your goodness we have received the bread we offer you: Fruit of the earth and work of hands, it will become for us the bread of life.²⁰

Assuming the priestly responsibility of human beings, the chief celebrant, as an assembly representative, establishes harmonious triadic relationships in praise and thanksgiving. The eucharistic mindset, the proper disposition of human beings in the congregation in worship, comes in great relief, projecting the course of life healthily and happily.

Jesus called his disciples “friends” and revealed the secret of his heart. “I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father” (Jn 15:15). Understanding and relating to others as friends is the key to a peaceful and joyful living. This friendship amounts to self-sacrifice for the sake of the other. Jesus not only taught it but also witnessed it throughout his life. Inspired by the Master, the faithful are called upon to consider everyone as friends and every being in the creation as friends. Friendship and stewardship towards creation will help people enter a cordial relationship, rediscovering the heartbeat for harmonious living.

2.3. Oneness in God

Oneness in God is the essence of all relationships. It is communion with the Lord from which all other relationships spring and lifestream flows from the source of all triadic realities and emerging relationships.

God is the source of life. Wherever there is life, there is God. There is no life without God. It is the breath of God which gives life to all things, including human beings. God is the author of life, the author of all, including creations.

Union and communion with God make the relationships visible and credible. Without God as the connecting and sustaining link, drawing the map of triadic relationships is unimaginable and unsustainable.

Seeing the presence of God in everything is the way forward to work towards an integral ecology. Creation filled with the abiding

²⁰ *The Roman Missal*, English Translation According to the Third Typical Edition, Approved for use in the Dioceses of India by the Conference of Catholic Bishops of India and Confirmed by the Apostolic See, 2011, 504.

presence of God makes a difference in the approaches and attitudes of human beings. The sacredness of creation is embedded in one's belief in God. Encountering the sacredness of creation and human beings will set relationships right and integrated.

The first verse of Īśāvāsya Upanishad underlines the sacredness of creation because of the Lord's abiding presence, and relations matter correspondingly:

īśā vāsyamidam sarvaṁ yatkiñca jagatyām jagat

tena tyaktena bhun̄jīthā mā ḡdhaḥ kasyasviddhanam

The whole world, moving and non-moving, is enveloped in God.

Enjoy things with a sense of renunciation; do not grab anyone's wealth.

These couplets bestow a horizon close to that of the Angelic hymn at the Nativity of Jesus but with a moral injunction and direction. There is a similarity between the two hymns in the case of threefold realities and concurrent relationships: the Lord, Land, and People. Interestingly, the relationships are guided and governed by the abiding presence of the Lord in the world. Accordingly, one may enjoy the world but with a sense of renunciation. Again, the moral directive is loud and clear: one should not appropriate the wealth of others; there is an added emphasis on the possession of wealth justly. All these instructions are founded on the premise that the Lord pervades and permeates the world. The encounter of the Lord in the world transforms one's relations with the earth and people; the pervading presence of the Lord posits a right vision for human actions driven by one's belief.

3. Celebration of Life

Life is the foundation, force, and focus of celebration and vice versa; one mirrors the other. No life means no celebration. The universe has a rhythm, and the change in annual seasons is a tangible reality. Tuning into the universe's music makes life a dance, beginning with the elementary breathing exercises life's orchestra played. Those in communion with the Lord, land, and people make their lives excellent celebrations. Feeling the pace of the world and its offering gives life its colour and flavour, irrespective of the people's field of expertise and experience. The taste of celebration is open to all who learn, love, and live the interconnectivity of all things, starting with the elements of the

universe. Inserting oneself into the world's *satyam*, *shivam*, and *sundaram* (truth, goodness, and beauty) already set in motion makes life enjoyable and enterprising. The wheel of celebration keeps moving, but celebrations project life depending on their immersion in coherence and comprehensive vision as and when they unfold in space and time.

The key to life and celebration is the relationship. What, who, why, when, where, and how celebrations determine life and its flourishing in the offing. Celebration is the catchword of the present culture. The celebration of life and its relationships go hand in hand. Life is the fundamental good without which nothing is imaginable, thinkable, takable, and doable.

3.1. Mystery of Life

Creation is a mystery, a puzzle and a riddle that is challenging to grasp thoroughly and comprehensively. The more you know of creation, the greater it is to be known. It remains a mystery, attracting to the subtle realities and relationships, leaving more room for further exploration.

People approached creation with a sense of awe and wonder, and it offered them a world of resources and research to navigate their lives harmoniously. The advent of objectification and the unbridled exploitation of natural resources for lavish living overturned the approach to creation upside down. Greed overtook the needs of human beings, consequently plundering the wealth and health of the earth, which left human beings in great misery. The rhythm set in motion in creation is distorted and disturbed, and as a result, humans reap the havoc.

The misery and poverty of humanity depend on its misconception of reality. It is imperative to regain the sense of mystery and begin to approach the world with aesthetic and ethical parameters that respect the inherent and integral web of relationships. When relationships are recognised and respected, the misuse and abuse of creation will end. A sense of mystery might help check the misery of humanity and the ecological crisis.

The sacredness of creation goes with a sense of mystery. People considered creation and everything in it sacred and holy, for it is the creation of God, and hence, the presence of God in everything. Such a spiritual attitude is a saving one, at least on two counts: one, it saves the environment, and two, it promotes subjectivity and relationality

among people. Those who are genuinely spiritual are happy with the minimum and do not exploit or covet the wealth of others. All things become shared resources and a shared responsibility to uphold the rhythm of the world, for fundamentally and finally, it belongs to God, the Lord of all.

The sacramentality of creation is a revered tradition in the Church, especially in the East. All things reveal God and shout for joy. Jesus contemplated the mystery of God in creation and communicated God's reality through its wonders. For instance, in illustrating God's mercy, Jesus uses the metaphors of rain and rays of sunlight: "For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the righteous" (Mt 5:45). A close watch of reality and its operation takes people to the world of mystery of God, where inclusivity and diversity become the order of the day. Recovery of the mystery dimension of the world is essential to redeeming the world and human beings.

3.2. Mastery of oneself

The celebration of life presupposes a degree of freedom and faithfulness; it demands discipline and direction. Mastery of life is the measure of the celebration of life. An unexamined life is not worth living.

People often ignore or neglect self-mastery in the race for power, pleasure, and position in life. Utilitarianism and hedonism are rampant in our age and culture, sidelining self-discipline's value. The idea that small is beautiful is outdated. People seem to have lost the wisdom to say enough is enough at some point in time.

Watching how the celebrations are held at various levels and spheres is disheartening. Often, these festivities are extravagant and add to the environmental pollution and food waste. Even academic conferences and seminars without a gala dinner are unthinkable, and this is no exception in ecclesiastical circles.

Celebrations assume the style of cutthroat competitions. The present trend seems to throw away the soul culture of festivities and go after pomp and glory, leaving the congregation without anchoring and focus. Fireworks, decorations, and illuminations are out of proportion and contribute to traffic congestion and environmental pollution. In the name of faith witness and proclamation, the organisers of festive processions make noise and emit poison, causing health hazards. The scale of success of festivities is measured by who

creates more sounds, scenes, and fundraising, often devoid of inner depth and conversion of hearts, and restoring ruptured relationships. This kind of celebration is also on the increase in personal and family circles. Time spent in silence is considered a waste. People are after conquering the whole world without having a self-mastery. The danger of self-destruction is inevitable. Self-mastery is a sine qua non for building and celebrating relationships, the key to integral ecology. Be the change you want to see in the world; change begins with me and at home.

Jesus on the Cross is a typical example of self-mastery, embracing death on the cross as the sign of consecration or surrender to the will of God. The tree symbolising slavery due to the grabbing culture is given a facelift as the tree of life through self-mastery through free and faithful surrender, the culture of giving. It is a mark of his filial relationship with God. The self-mastery of Jesus on the cross is a sign of hope for developing a sustainable and integral ecology.

3.3. Mystic on the Move

Human beings are mystics, capable of seeing unifying and integrating cosmic order and connectedness in the universe. As they grow, children learn to see it at home among siblings and parents, their relations and neighbours, and they naturally relate to everything within their reach with the proper perspective. They spontaneously play with people beyond discrimination unless taught to keep a distance. Children move freely and mingle without fear. They belong to the kingdom of God, as Jesus taught. Moreover, Jesus invited all to be like children and enter God's kingdom. Their innocence, fearlessness, and playfulness make them special and attract the attention of the elders. Human beings are mystics in their fibre.

Often, we have the false notion that mysticism is reserved for the special and elite. The truth of the matter is otherwise. In broader terms, a mystic sees God in everything and everything in God. Mysticism is the ability to perceive parts of the whole as interconnected, interdependent, and integrated. Effortlessly, whoever sees God's presence in everything and the providence of God governs and guides everything and all events. This encountering experience is accessible to the simple and humble. This easiness is why all mystics are simple and humble. Jesus instructed and illustrated it by saying, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Mt 5: 6). One who sees God in everything and at every event of life is a mystic. Jesus saw God as

he raised his eyes to heaven, a characteristic note of Jesus. Raise our eyes and see God in moments of wonder and worry. Jesus experienced the filial embrace of his Father in all critical and challenging moments, at the moment of transfiguration and tribulation on the cross. The hallmark of mysticism is experiencing God in utter chaos and cosmos. Mystics are revered and responded to for fine-tuning this vision or darshan. Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara of the Holy Family was a mystic in the real sense of the time, for his longing was to see the Lord, as illustrated in his epic poem, *The Compunction of the Heart*. There was a time when many thought holiness was only for a few elites. *Lumen Gentium* rediscovered and reiterated the beauty of the call to holiness. Integrated ecology is a wake-up call to expand the inherent sight of interconnectivity to embrace God's abiding presence and providence in everything.

Karl Rahner spoke about a course correction for the future of Christianity, "the Christian of the future will be a mystic or will not be a Christian any more."²¹ A mystic has a 'genuine experience of God emerging from the heart of our existence'.²² Patricia Carroll observes rightly, "Rahner is here moving mysticism from the margins of Christian life to the centre; this version of mysticism is not a mark of the privileged soul, but rather a feature of people's everyday experience as they struggle to live the Christian way of life."²³ She elaborates on the everyday mysticism propounded by Karl Rahner:

It is everyday life, rather than explicit prayer or meditation, that leads us to the Mystery: experiences of aloneness, of freedom and responsibility, of judgment, of receiving love, of facing death, of the peace which comes from giving up attachments. It is in ordinary life that the Mystery breaks in upon our awareness.²⁴

While Rahner reiterated the everyday mysticism of Christianity, Walter Kasper pointed out an open-eyed mysticism. "the global Catholic church should develop a new spirituality of "having open eyes" and recognising God's presence more in our brothers and sisters."²⁵ It is time to rediscover everyday mysticism with an open eye,

²¹ Patricia Carroll, "Moving Mysticism to the Centre. Karl Rahne 1904-1984," *The Way*, 43/4 (October 2004), 41.

²² P. Carroll, "Moving Mysticism to the Centre," 41.

²³ P. Carroll, "Moving Mysticism to the Centre," 41.

²⁴ P. Carroll, "Moving Mysticism to the Centre," 50.

²⁵Joshua J. Mcelvey, "Cardinal Kasper calls for global church of 'outstretched hand,' living Matthew 25," (accessed on 23 March 2024) <https://www.ncronline>.

which faith in the Lord endows with, enables, and expects from people. It is natural and works of the grace of God as we breathe in and out.

Such mysticism is our culture and heritage. A vision of open-eyed everyday mysticism is caught rather than taught; it is the living of simple faith in the Lord. Children grew up seeing what their elders were doing. The spontaneous utterance “*isho rakshikka*” (Jesus save me!), or “*ishoye*” (Oh my Jesus!), or “*daivame*” (Oh, Lord!) is a vibrant expression of an ancient and alive confessional practice among the Thomas Christians of India. The closeness of the Lord is professed in public with joy and without hesitation. The utterances “he Ram” and “Hare Krishna” of the Hindu brethren and “*isha allah*” of Muslims are examples of such everyday mysticism, which is not anything theoretical and dogmatic but springs from a simple but profound faith in the Lord who pervades and abides in all, as the Lord of all. The invocation, “Lord of All”, is repeatedly celebrated in the Qurbana, which is the breath of the believer, and such an outlook on the world and human beings will bestow a vision and action plan for an integral ecology.

The culture of sophistication and manifestation without inner content and conviction has distracted and distorted the genuine vision, if not destroyed, of inclusivity and diversity as marks of beauty, joy and glory in life. The virtual is mistaken for real, and the real relationships remain a distant or forgotten reality. Seeing the worth of simplicity, humility, and dignity will enhance the vision of integral ecology and enjoy the life of mysticism, inherent in every organism, a mark of the indelible sign of the divine governance and cosmos, the reign of God – thy kingdom come as it is in heaven.

Conclusion

We are but our relationships. Celebrating relationships is the pathway to the dawn of life in all its forms and spheres. Life is an epiphany of one’s bonds, attaining more excellent expansions and dimensions. Today, life, in general, and human life, in particular, is in the danger zone, beginning with the impact of the ecosystem on economics and ethics, for all is part of the same triadic reality. Maintaining the triadic relationship is the key to evolving and

developing an integral ecology, which is the need of the hour. An integral development must attend to the manifold relations with God, creation, and human beings. There is nothing alien or insignificant in the project of life and its flourishing at every level and stage. It is similar to the allegory of the body, to which every member belongs and all is important. At the same time, none of the life community members can claim supremacy over another on any count; all are uniquely ordered and inherently interrelated, which ensures harmony of life. Biocracy, more than democracy, should be the hallmark of our age. It means the protection, preservation, and promotion of life. Life should be the measure of every human action on earth. The dream of earth and all it holds has an inalienable right to flourish, which consists of the joy of all. As priests in the creation, human beings should take the whole creation to the daily and eternal celebration of life. "Let us stop thinking, then, of human beings as autonomous, omnipotent and limitless, and begin to think of ourselves differently, in a humbler but more fruitful way" (LD § 68)²⁶. Pope Francis asks everyone

"to accompany this pilgrimage of reconciliation with the world that is our home and to help make it more beautiful, because that commitment has to do with our personal dignity and highest values" (LD § 69). Thomas Berry made the point years before, "But just because we humans are best in one area does not mean that we are absolutely the best. The thing that is best absolutely is the community of the planet, the community of species."²⁷

Integral ecology is a call to review and renew our relationships in life. In essence, integral ecology presupposes a change of lifestyle. Be the change you want in the world; change begins at home.

The acute shortage of potable water in Bengaluru is the day's news.²⁸ Bijoor asks, "So what's your problem, Bengaluru? The city today is host to 142,00,000 people and their daily need for water. Water to drink, water to cook, water to bathe with, water to wash our cars, and to water our potted plants in balconies and the private gardens of the privileged few."²⁹ His proposal has a valuable ecological insight:

²⁶ Francis, *Laudate Deum*, 2023. (accessed on 10 November 2023) https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/20231004-laudate-deum.html

²⁷ T. Berry with T. Clarke, *Befriending the Earth*, 102.

²⁸ Harish Bijoor, "The Shape of Water Woes to Come," *The New Indian Express*, accessed on 12 March 2024. <https://www.newindianexpress.com/opinions/2024/Mar/11/the-shape-of-water-woes-to-come>

²⁹ Harish Bijoor, "The Shape of Water Woes to Come,"

Bengaluru cannot aggregate into a bigger-and-bigger city anymore. It needs to disaggregate. Let us remember, water will not come where the people are. People will instead need to go where the water is. Big cities need to de-cluster. Big cities need to re-assemble where the water is. The old dictum says it all: if you fail to plan, you plan to fail.³⁰

To address the growing ecological issues of our times, the journey to the source of life is the need of the hour. The path to the wellspring of life is through a transformative lifestyle, beginning with regaining the mystery aspect of life and the mastery of oneself, and the sure path to it is by being mystic. Jesus on the Cross might give us a clue as to how to hold the sense of mystery and self-mastery in creative tension, leading to the celebration of the resurrection and new life. Being a mystic bestows a beautiful blending of mystery and mastery. Jesus, the Tree of Life, symbolises mystery, mastery and mysticism, being in communion with God, "Father into your hands I entrust my spirit" (Lk 23:46), the narrow way to integrated ecology where earth and heaven coming together and celebrate life in abundance.

³⁰ Harish Bijoor, "The Shape of Water Woes to Come,"