

Christian Response to the Ecological Challenges in the Globalised World

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Introduction

Eco-consciousness is most essential for the survival of all living beings. Understanding of the eco-system, its functions and fruition is very fundamental to human society. Human history reveals to us that human persons at various stages discovered the utility of nature. It started with fear making nature as god, conquering nature paved way for numerous inventions and commodification of nature caused drastic disaster not only to nature but also to human beings. Today all caution that before we encounter irreparable loss by nature we need to protect nature. As Albert Einstein once said "If humans by their foolishness destroy nature and nature too will destroy humans by its foolishness". It is a serious problem that all of us need to understand. We try to find out what is in the moon forgetting the beauty and benevolence of the Mother Earth. Prof. Fenner said "We fly to the moon, but we are too stupid for this". The Church in the modern times understood the seriousness of the issue and calls its members and the human family to change the idea of nature. It also cautions the human family of the atrocities against nature

and warns the serious effects of such misuse of the natural resources. Pope Francis beautifully reminds us that the earth is “our common home (who) is like a sister with whom we share our life and a beautiful mother who opens her arms to embrace us.” (*Laudato si* no. 1) This article is an effort to bring to light the Church teachings on ecology that could help the reader to address the ecological concerns and make this earth our common home.

Ecological Challenges in Modern Times

1. Culture of irresponsibility

Culture is the mirror of a society. Today modern society irrespective of nations has developed a culture of irresponsibility towards nature. Nature with its own limitation is beautiful, pure and beneficial to all living organs. The air we breathe, water we drink, sun light our body experiences, space we occupy, earth that is source of food are magnanimous in giving good things to the beneficiaries. Human person with great sense of responsibility used to depend on nature but times have changed that humans have become so irresponsible that they do not care for what happens to the nature. This culture of irresponsibility is revealed in the way we pollute the nature, handle wastes, and consumerism known as throwaway culture.

Pollution: Nature is essentially a giver. The three fundamental principles of ecology are “produce, consume and decompose”. Nature has a system that it purifies itself by giving it to other. It nourishes itself and supports other living and non-living organs. It does not pollute itself rather it purifies itself constantly. Nature purifies itself so that it can continuously give to others. But humans out of ignorance on one side and on the other side wantonly pollute the mother nature.

Waste Management: Nature’s waste is wealth. Anything that we consider waste from nature is decomposable. Either it becomes feed to

some insects known as decomposers such as white ants or it dissolves into the earth. Humans without understanding the nature of nature invented materials that do not decompose rather disintegrate and remain as pollutants. Plastic is one such example. Everyday tones of plastics are used by humans. But there is no substantial mechanism to recycle non decomposable materials. The result is hillocks of waste materials are stored in living areas. Countries such as India do not have any political will to manage the solid wastes. People also do not cooperate with government machinery and volunteers. Non-decomposable materials have become so dangerous to humans and animals. Throwaway culture has caused great dangers to the wellbeing of every living organ on earth.

2. Commodification of Mother Nature

Mother nature is a gift of God for all beings. It is meant for living. It supports humans in their need. But greed has filled in the mind of modern generation and it resulted in seeing nature as a profit making commodity. That which supported all beings for their survival has been made now a money making commodity. Older generation honoured nature even as holy and worshiped it, but modern mind does not seem to have neither sense of holiness, awe nor respect. People especially politicians and traders try to exploit nature mercilessly. Therefore, nature is not seen as life sustaining mechanism rather money minting machine. It is a great danger for the future generation.

Urbanisation: One of the challenges of ecology is the urbanisation. Pope Francis rightly states in *Laudato Si* that the disproportionate and unduly growth of many cities have caused toxic emissions, poor transportation, and visual pollution and noise. Some newly built cities too lack proper planning, congested which cause excessive waste of energy and water above all insufficient green space. It is cautioned that we are not meant to be inundated

by cement, asphalt, glass and metal, and deprived of physical contact with nature. (*Laudato si* no. 44. Hereafter cited as LS)

Global Inequality: Humans and other creatures form an interdependent community. All support each other for prosperity and many times cause destruction. Pope Francis worriedly expresses his concern over the destruction of environment which badly affected the wellbeing of humans especially the most vulnerable are very badly affected. Citing the Bolivian Bishop's pastoral letter the Pope says "Both everyday experience and scientific research show that the gravest effects of all attacks on the environment are suffered by the poorest". (LS 48.) The poor become poorer by losing their livelihood and more so, not being able to buy the basic essentials such as drinking water that has to be bought for heavy price. The pope is quite categorical to say "we have to realize that a true ecological approach *always* becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear *both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor.*" (LS 49)

Ecological Debt: The environmental disaster affects not only individuals but also countries. The richer countries by direct or indirect exploitation cause for the disproportionate use of natural resources. The export of raw materials to satisfy markets in the industrialised countries has caused harm locally, as for example in mercury pollution in gold mining or sulphur dioxide pollution in copper mining. (LS 51.) The so called developmental projects in recent times in India is a great example to this. Hydrocarbon project in the Cauvery belt and Neutrino project in the Western Ghats are the best examples. The livelihood of the locals is at stake because of these measures to satisfy certain big companies or countries.

Weak Response: One of the most dangerous aspects of ecology is world leaders' insensitivity towards eco issues and problems. In the human history Sister Earth has not undergone so much of hurt and humiliation as

within these two hundred years in the name of industrial revolution. Every human person is responsible to bring back the originality of nature as God planned and created. The pope says “We lack the culture needed to confront this crisis. We lack leadership capable of striking out on new paths meeting the needs of the present with concern for all and without prejudice towards coming generations.” (LS 53).

Christian Response to the Ecological Crises

1. Ecological wisdom of different Cultures

The complexity of the ecological crises is so dense that not just one particular thing could give a solution to the crises. Rather the Pope is quite reasonable and open to say that respect should be shown for the various cultural riches of different peoples, their art and poetry, their interior life and spirituality. Tantamount the wisdom and science of all religions and culture should be adapted in addressing the ecological crises.

2. Faith and Commitment to Nature

Believers are plenty in the world. They like to be loyal to God but the problem is caring for the nature does not seem to be coming in circumference of their faith. People dichotomise faith and the everyday life. Caring for the nature is one of the key features of one's faith. Nature is the gift of God and above all it becomes the extension of God's plan and providence for all creatures. Without nature one cannot experience God's blessings. The Pope while inviting people of all faith he very precisely reminds the Christian faithful that they should “realize their responsibility within creation, and their duty towards nature and the Creator, are part of their faith.” (LS 64) A true Christian cannot be irresponsible towards nature. S/he should take all steps to preserve nature while enjoying the fruit of it. Prophet Isaiah says the

whole earth is the footstep of God (Is 66:1). Therefore, a believer should be truthful to his/her call to honour God by protecting nature.

3. The Wisdom of the Bible

The Bible basically affirms the relation between God, human persons and nature. The rupture in these relationships caused a great void in the original purpose of creation. The negative understanding the Biblical narrative in the past with the anthropocentric understanding of creation caused a pessimistic approach to nature. In recent times the *Theocosmoanthropocentric* approach in understanding the Bible paved way for the positive approach. Pope Francis not in the traditional way ('man as the centre of creation') but from a holistic perspectives gives a balanced view.

Primarily the earth does not belong to human beings but "the earth is the Lord's (Ps 24:1); to him belongs "the earth with all that is within it" (Deut 10:14). Thus God rejects every claim to absolute ownership: "The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with me" (Lev 25:23) (LS 67). Human beings can with their intelligence maintain the *equilibria* existing between creatures of this world. For, "God commanded and they were created; and he established them for ever and ever; he fixed their bounds and he set a law which cannot pass away" (Ps 148:5b-6). The Bible quite clearly explains the mutual respect humans should have towards nature. "You shall not see your brother's donkey or his ox fallen down by the way and withhold your help.. If you chance to come upon a bird's nest in any tree or on the ground, with young ones or eggs and the mother sitting upon the young or upon the eggs; you shall not take the mother with the young." (Dt 22:4,6) The day of rest is not merely for humans but also for other beings "that your ox and your donkey may have rest". Ex 23:12). The Pope is categorical to say that the Bible has no

place for a tyrannical anthropocentrism unconcerned for the other creatures. (LS 68).

4. Religious Feasts with an eco-sense

The people of Israel celebrated feasts with an eco-thrust. These days were celebrated expressing their relation with nature, though they did not interpret as we interpret today. It is sure that the biblical tradition expressed the rhythms inscribed in nature by the hand of the Creator.

The day of Sabbath: On the seventh day God rested from all his work. He commanded Israel to set aside each seventh day as a day of rest a *Sabbath*, (cf. Gen 2:2-3; Ex 16:23; 20:10)

The Sabbatical Year: Every seventh year a sabbatical year was set aside for Israel, a complete rest for the land (cf. Lev 25:1-4).

Jubilee Year: After seven weeks of years which is to say forty-nine years, the Jubilee was celebrated as a year of general forgiveness and “liberty throughout the land for all its inhabitants” and the lands were returned to the owner.

5. Intrinsic Value of Creatures

People usually believe that only humans have intrinsic value and respect or inherent value that nobody can take away. But the Church says “by their mere existence they (creatures) bless him and give him glory” (CCC 2416) and indeed, “he rejoices in all his works” (Ps 104:31). The Catechism of the Catholic Church clearly affirms the inherent value of creatures. “Each creature possesses its own particular goodness and perfection... Each of the various creatures, willed in its own being, reflects in its own way a ray of God’s infinite wisdom and goodness. Man must

therefore respect the particular goodness of every creature, to avoid any disordered use of things.” (CCC. 339)

6. Creation or Nature

In the Judaeo-Christian tradition, the word “creation” has a broader meaning than “nature”. Creation signifies God’s loving plan which every creature has its own value and significance. It is understood as the gift of God the Father to all and calls all creatures for the universal communion. Nature on the other hand is usually seen as a system which can be studied, understood and controlled. Therefore, the universe is not out of chaos or an accident rather the result of a decision of God “By the word of the Lord the heavens were made” (Ps 33:6). God’s love was the fundamental moving force in all created things: “For you love all things that exist, and detest none of the things that you have made; for you would not have made anything if you had hated it” (Wis 11:4). God’s concern for the creatures is no less than that God has for the human persons. (Ps 104). Love generates and leads to newness. God’s love is in complete association with the creative power of human persons. The Pope says citing the words of St. John Paul II “The Holy Spirit can be said to possess an infinite creativity, proper to the divine mind, which knows how to loosen the knots of human affairs, including the most complex and inscrutable”. (LS 80) The creative power of humans makes them unique as persons with a great sense of responsibility imaging God. Human uniqueness is not for arrogantly controlling exploiting the nature but as Jesus said “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you: but whoever would be great among you must be your servant” (Mt 20:25-26) Humans should deeply understand the value of nature and become servants of nature as it serves humans.

7. The Harmony of Creation

The uniqueness of each creature is not to be independent but rather for a purpose. The entire material universe speaks of God's love, his boundless affection for us. Soil, water, mountains: everything is a caress of God. There is a mutual communion among creatures to support each other. The Catechism of the Catholic Church rightly teaches: "God wills the interdependence of creatures. The sun and the moon, the cedar and the little flower, the eagle and the sparrow: the spectacle of their countless diversities and inequalities tells us that no creature is self-sufficient. Creatures exist only in the dependence on each other, to complete each other, in the service of each other". (CCC 340)

The hymn of St. Francis of Assisi expresses this communion in a more beautiful way:

Praised be you, my Lord, with all your creatures,
Especially Sir Brother Sun,
Who is the day
And through whom you give us light.
And he is beautiful and radiant
With great splendour;
And bears a likeness of you, Most High.
Praised be you, my Lord,
Through Sister Moon and the stars,
in heaven you formed them clear
and precious and beautiful.
Praised be you, my Lord,
Through Brother Wind,
And through the air, cloudy and serene,
and every kind of weather

through whom you give sustenance
to your creatures.

Praised be you, my Lord, through Sister Water,
Who is very useful and humble
and precious and chaste.

Praised be you, my Lord, through Brother Fire,
Through whom you light the night,
And he is beautiful and playful
And robust and strong". (LS 87)

8. Integral Ecology:

The modern crisis of ecology is so intense that it is deviated from the original plan of God that is "Communion". Pope Francis envisages an integral approach that can revive the dignity of creation. Primarily one should regard nature as something not separate from ourselves or as a mere setting in which we live. We are part of nature, included in it and thus in constant interaction with it. Everything we do should incorporate the nature and its ramifications that we form an integral ecology.

Economical growth is indispensable. The Pope proposes the need for an "**economic ecology**" where environment is seen as "an integral part of the development process and cannot be considered in isolation from it". (LS 141)

Solidarity is the basis of harmony among humans and creatures. Every violation of solidarity and civic friendship harms the environment. Therefore, the Pope proposes '**Social ecology**' where necessary institutions are established permeating the whole society from family, local, national and international community at large. Strict laws to be enacted in order to empower these institutions which are to regulate human relationships.

Ecology is deeply rooted in a particular history, culture and architecture of each place with its own unique characteristics. Therefore, **cultural ecology** according to the Pope involves protecting the cultural treasures of humanity in the broadest sense focusing on the local cultures.

9. Ecology of Daily Life

Authentic development includes efforts to bring about an integral improvement in the quality of human life. This demands for the way people live their daily lives, the way we think, feel and act. Every place, be of our homes, workplaces and neighbourhoods we use our environment as a way of expressing our identity. The Pope is quite succinct to say that when our environment is disorderly, chaotic or saturated with noise and ugliness it is difficult to find ourselves integrated and happy (LS 147). Therefore ecology does not bypass our everyday life but incorporated. India is the best example where the everyday life of citizens does not care for this integration between daily life and ecology and thus real peace and prosperity are missing. Lakes, rivers are acquired for buildings and mostly they become public dust bins. The surroundings of houses in most of the villages are brutal to the core filled with plastics and non-decomposable wastes. It risks the inhabitants with health hazards.

10. Key Elements of Eco-Consciousness

Ecological Education

People need the awareness to understand the gravity of today's cultural and ecological crisis. But modern mind has grown up in a milieu of extreme consumerism and affluence that do not permit them to have alternative view. They lack proper ecological education. Pope Francis says that **ecological education not information** is so vital for the change of mind of human

persons. Ecological education imbibes in individual a sense of solidarity, responsibility and compassionate care. It creates in humans an ecological habit or an eco-friendly lifestyle.

Eco-Spirituality

Modern society is entangled by consumerism. The techno-economic paradigm affects individuals. People think new gadgets are part of their life. They are compelled to believe possession of material goods is a proof of modernisation. It becomes one's life style. The emptier a person's heart is, the more he or she needs things to buy, own and consume. We not only should worry about the environmental disorder but the attitude of persons. The Pope calls everyone for a change of lifestyle from selfishness to the other centred. Eco-spirituality is nothing other than seeing nature as a gift to use with maximum sense of respect not exploiting with narcissistic attitude.

Eco – Conversion

“The external deserts in the world are growing because the internal deserts have become so vast”. Pope Francis citing the words of Pope Benedict XVI says ecological conversion is a great need for ecological protection. Conversion is the total realisation of one's mistakes and complete change of heart for a new lifestyle. Therefore, the Pope says the effects of one's encounter with Jesus Christ become evident in one's relationship with the world around him/her. (LS 217) The Australian Bishops spoke of the importance of such conversion for achieving reconciliation with creation: “To achieve such reconciliation, we must examine our lives and acknowledge the ways in which we have harmed God's creation through our actions and our failure to act. We need to experience a conversion or change of heart”. (LS 218)

Conclusion

Ecology is a deeper knowledge about our common home, the earth. It has been a much discussed subject at all levels. The Church has taken it up as her special call to speak on behalf of the common home. Pope Francis by his generous reflection affirmed that the earth belongs not simply to humans but to every creature on the earth. The earth is the common home belonging to all. Humans cannot claim to be its sole proprietor. Therefore they need to be responsible and respectful in handling the common property, the earth. The well appreciated encyclical letter by Pope Francis *Laudato Si* is a great inspiration to all irrespective religion or nationality. People have more information about the ecological crisis but need political will to convert themselves. It is a laborious task of all those care for this common home to speak for a drastic change. Unless we speak out and change the way we live the nature will take its own course of action to set things right. It is our moral responsibility to save nature for the future generation. The future generation should not blame us for having left them with polluted nature or nothing at all. Saving nature is serving God, humanity, and creatures.