



Love for the Poor and Concern for the Earth A Biblical Appraisal of *Laudato Si'*

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We live in a century when science and technology is making rapid growth and at the same time it is characterized by the misuse and abuse causing great concern for the ecosystem. The long history of exploitation of creation is a reason for the irreversible climate change. Taking care of nature thus has become a vital issue for the political as well as the intellectual world today. At this juncture Pope Francis' Encyclical *Laudato Si - Praise be to you*, is a **beacon of light** for everyone. Therefore the encyclical is a worldwide wake-up call to protect the earth "**our common home**" from the impending ecological crisis and destruction.

Laudato Si: Chapter II The Gospel of Creation, is the most spiritual part of the encyclical showing how faith oriented response brings incentive and requirements needed in the society for the healing of the ecosystem at the brink of this ecological collapse. The Pope here says that "environment is

God's self-revelation and it is something through which God is speaking to us." It presents a comprehensive view of creation and preservation of creation that comes from biblical perspective, and calls for a '*conversion of heart*' in taking care of the nature and the poor while we make scientific and technological progress. The following is a summary of the chapter offering headings with a critical commentary.

The entire creation of God is good

"God saw everything that he had made, and behold it was *very good*" (*Gen* 1:31). What has happened to this creation that was good? - it is beginning to look more and more like an immense pile of filth" (21). We have forgotten that we ourselves are dust of the earth (*Gen* 2:7); our very bodies are made up of her elements, we breathe her air and we receive her life and refreshment from her waters (2).

The uniqueness of human being

Every man and woman is created out of love and made in God's image and likeness (cf. *Gen* 1:26). This shows us the immense dignity of each person, "who is not just something, but someone". The uniqueness is not meant to show our superiority over the other, but to live in harmony with everyone and the entire universe. Responsibility for God's earth means that human beings, endowed with intelligence, must respect the laws of nature and the delicate relationship existing between the creatures of this world" (*Pss* 148:5b-6). This uniqueness places great responsibility on humans that is, to take care of the earth entrusted to them (cf. 65).

Need of a correct understanding of *Gen* 2:15.

Christianity is not an anthropocentric religion at the expense of the other creation as wrongly understood and accused of. The biblical texts are to be read in their context, with an appropriate hermeneutic, recognizing that they tell us to "till and keep" the garden of the world (cf. *Gen* 2:15). "Tilling" refers to cultivating, ploughing or working, while "keeping" means

caring, protecting, overseeing and preserving. These two verbs indicate the responsibility of human species to work in the creation and also to protect it lets it is deprived of its divine beauty. This implies a relationship of mutual responsibility between human beings and nature (cf. 67).

Ours is a related existence

The creation story (Gen 1:27-28; 2:4) suggests that human life is grounded in three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: with God, with neighbour, with self and with the earth itself. Yet these four vital relationships have been broken, both outwardly and within us. This rupture is sin. (Gen 3:1-23). As a result there arose conflicts and enmity between each other and much sufferings and sorrows. The earth was no longer a paradise to live in.

The earth gets polluted under its inhabitants

Prosperity means also fraternal love (Gen 4:9-11. In the story of Cain and Abel, the relationship between God and Cain and between Cain and the earth is seen estranged because of the injustice done to his brother. The consequences were: (1) Land crying out to God for justice (2) Constant fear and restlessness (Gen 4:9-11); (3) Alienation from God and neighbor (4) and bareness of the land. As in the words of Prophet Isaiah, “The earth is polluted under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant” (Is 24:5ff) (cf. 71-72). The earth suffers under the sin of its inhabitants.

Love of God Demands Love of Neighbor and Nature

The Deuteronomic covenant was a call to worship only Yahweh (Deut 6:4-5); this then overflowed into all areas of life, e.g., concern for the poor (Deut 15:1-18), and justice in the legal

system (Deut 16:18–20) as well as in the economic sphere (Deut 25:13–16). It extends even to caring for the natural environment (Deut 20:19–20). Israel’s very life and existence depend on this; covenant fidelity will lead to blessing; infidelity, to curse that would affect all the areas of life (Deut 28). The prophet Isaiah again shows the consequence of transgressing the law and the covenantal rules:

“The windows of heaven are opened, and the foundations of the earth tremble. The earth is utterly broken, the earth is torn asunder, and the earth is violently shaken. The earth staggers like a drunkard, it sways like a hut; its transgression lies heavy upon it, and it falls, and will not rise again” (Is 24:18-20).

Sabbath Regulations for Love and Justice.

1. Seventh day was a day of rest, a *Sabbath*, (cf. Gen 2:2-3; Ex 16:23; 20:10).
2. Every seven year, a sabbatical year was set aside for Israel, and a complete rest for the land (cf. Lev 25:1-4): when sowing was forbidden and one reaped only what was necessary to live on and to feed one’s household (cf. Lev 25:4-6).
3. The forty-ninth year, the Jubilee was celebrated as a year of general forgiveness and “liberty throughout the land for all its inhabitants” (cf. Lev 25:10).

Land is healed when human returns to God

God calls for a healing: he says that if the people who are called by his name

1. humble themselves
2. pray seek his face,
3. and turn from their wicked ways

then God will :

1. hear from heaven,

2. forgive their sin
3. and **heal their land**. (2Ch 7: 14) we see this in the story of Noah.

Land is healed when people return to the demands of the covenantal relationship with God: a need very much felt today as we hear the cry of the poor and cry of the earth.

Call to worship God is a call for all creation

The Psalms frequently exhort us to praise God the Creator (Ps 136:60). They also invite other creatures to praise God with us (Ps 148:3-5). So all creation belongs to God, and is oriented towards him (cf. 72). This shows the value and sacredness of all creation, and they are to be respected and cared for.

Moments of crisis seen as a call to return to God

Prophets invite the people to find renewed strength in times of trial by contemplating the all-powerful God. “The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless” (Is 40:28b-29). This is the need of the hour – a complete turning to God in humility and trust - as the prophet Isaiah tells, ‘Your salvation lay in conversion and tranquility, your strength in serenity and trust (Is 30:15) (cf. 73-75).

Love for creation is not nature worship

The creation of the world by god is not a by chance creation. God’s love is the fundamental moving force in all created things (cf. Wis 11:24). Every creature is thus the object of the Father’s tenderness, who gives it its place in the world. The Bible never sees nature as the object of our worship but emphasizes our responsibility towards caring for them. God reveals himself in creation but creation is not God. A fragile world, entrusted by

God to human care, challenges us *to devise intelligent ways of directing, developing and limiting our power*. The work of the Church is to care for the nature, but at the same time she should protect humankind from destruction (cf. 76 - 79).

Uniqueness of humans along with the other beings

The biblical accounts of creation invite us to see each human being as a subject who can never be reduced to the status of an object. We are capable of entering into a relationship to the other, and with oneself, with our reason and other capacities which can never be explained by any evolutionary theory. There is something beyond the evolution in humans. Yet the other beings are not mere objects subjected to human domination. God wills the interdependence of creatures. We should see God reflected in all that exists (cf. 84-87).

The world a universal family and it belongs to God

God has joined the humans to the world as a universal family. It is our duty to protect the earth and to ensure its fruitfulness for coming generations. "The earth is the Lord's" (*Ps* 24:1); to him belongs "the earth with all that is within it" (*Dt* 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). The Church is not against the legitimate right to private property but it must be in accordance with Gods regulations being mindful of the have-nots (cf. 93). So we have our great worth and tremendous responsibility which equals no other creatures.

Our passion for the protection of the universe is not to be at the expense of humankind. When there is great compassion and love for our brothers and sisters automatically that will flow to the other beings too (cf. 89-92). The earth is essentially a shared inheritance, whose fruits are meant to benefit everyone. Apart from the ownership of property, rural people must have access to means of technical education, credit, insurance, and markets."

God has written a precious book, “whose letters is the multitude of created things present in the universe” (cf. 93-95).

Ecology in the life and teachings of Jesus

Jesus looked at the lilies of the field, the sparrow of sky, the corns in the fields, the mountains, vineyards, the poor and needy, the children and the widows, the rich and the learned and found in them all the God who created them and this God is Father, for he says “your heavenly Father feeds them.” It is striking that most of his life was dedicated to the works of his hands in a simple life style which awakened no admiration at all (cf. 96 -100).

The destiny of all creation

The destiny of all creation is bound up with the mystery of Christ. Through him all things were made, all things exist and through him all things are reconciled to God. God so loved the world and sanctified it once again when the Eternal Word became flesh and dwelt among us. He was born in the manger surrounded by animals and the most natural realities. Today the whole cosmos is permeated by his glorious presence risen and dwelling with us even to the ends of time. The creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now (Rom 8:21-22). We have only one origin, one home, and one destiny that of Christ (cf. 99-100). So, a spirituality which forgets God as all-powerful and Creator is not acceptable. No development is a development worth its name ignoring the poor and needy and the destruction of the universe.

Conclusion

Nature cannot be destroyed without humankind ultimately being destroyed itself. Centuries of exploitation of the environment has finally caught up with us. This earth, so touchingly looked upon as our sister and mother lies in ruin has become a dust bin where we throw things which neither we can use nor the earth can take in; the result of our lack of prudence in progress.

The current deplorable environmental crisis demands a spiritual response too. A fundamental reorientation of human relatedness, accompanied by action that is born out of inner conversion and commitment, is very much needed. One of the measures that could help a great deal to fulfill this need is to regenerate and rejuvenate the basic values of biblical teachings. We have a long way to go to live up to the expectation of the encyclical. 🌱

The Alumni of Papal Seminary and Jnana-Deepa Vidaypeeth are invited for an International Conference on “Befriending the Other” on the occasion of sixty years of their existence in Pune, on November 24-28, 2015. Please mark these dates on your calendar.

For details, please visit: www.papalseminary.in