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Pope Francis's Call for *'Gharvapasi'*

Francis Gonsalves SJ
Papal Seminary, Pune 41104

“**O**ur common home is like a sister with whom we share our life and a beautiful mother who opens her arms to embrace us.” This introductory sentence in Pope Francis’s encyclical *‘Laudato Si’* (Latin, meaning, ‘Praised be, You!’)¹ sets the tone for reflections on our common home, the earth, and our relationship to Her. What strikes me as the core of this popular papal encyclical is the call for conversion, a so-called *‘gharvapasi’*, literally, a ‘home-coming’ that stands out as Pope Francis’s call and challenge to every Christian; indeed, to everyone whom our Mother Earth embraces, nurses and houses.

Pope Francis laments, “The earth, our home, is beginning to look more and more like an immense pile of filth”² due to many reasons: pollution, wastage, a throwaway culture, selfish exploitation of the earth’s resources and lack of concern for the poor, who are worst affected and least equipped to cope with ecological crises. Given this pathetic state of affairs, let’s ask ourselves: How can I-We respond to the Pope’s plea to clean this widespread global filth and respond to “both the cry of the earth and cry of the poor?”³

“In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places,” says Jesus to his disciples (Jn 14:2-3). Our ultimate destiny according to

Christian eschatology and cosmology is union with God—picturesquely seen as “Our Father’s Home: Heaven!” Indeed, the ‘good news’ that Jesus Christ came to give can basically be condensed in three simple propositions:

- 1) Our God of Love (1 Jn 4:8) is *Amma-Abba*-Parent of us all;
- 2) Jesus Christ, God’s Son, became flesh and ‘pitched his home-tent’ in our midst (Jn 1:14) so that all of us can become His sisters-brothers, and children of God;
- 3) God’s Spirit “who blows where it wills” (Jn 3:8) supports and sanctifies all of creation till Jesus will hand over everything and everyone “so that God may be all in all” (1 Cor 15:28).

This is a beautiful cosmic vision, which, unfortunately, has been reduced to a myopic, anthropocentric idea that brings destruction and death to everyone and everything.

It is beyond the scope of this short reflection to reflect upon the many nuances that the Biblical image of ‘house’ and ‘home’ brings.⁴ However, we must remember that the English words ecology, economics and ecumenism all have their etymological roots in the Greek word *oikos*, meaning, ‘home’. The Pope tells us to do some ‘homework’; and, since ‘charity begins at home’, what better way is there to keep our house clean than to begin with the singular “I-me”?

As a first step, the Pope calls us to an “ecological conversion”. He writes:⁵

[T]he ecological crisis is a summons to *profound interior conversion*. It must be said that some committed and prayerful Christians, with the excuse of realism and pragmatism, tend to ridicule expressions of concern for the environment. Others are passive; they choose not to change their habits and thus become inconsistent. So what they all need is an “*ecological conversion*”, whereby the effects

of their encounter with Jesus Christ become evident in their relationship with the world around them.

With this pointed, personal focus, we must all beat our breasts with a ‘*mea culpa*’ for engendering the devastation that we’ve brought upon God’s created cosmos. So, let’s first return to the ‘home of our hearts’ and truly be sorry for what we’ve done as individuals. Let’s also take simple but concrete ecofriendly measures to make this world a more habitable and hospitable home for all.

Beyond the purely personal level, we have sinned against God and Nature as community. As a Christian faith-community, Pope Francis invites us to contemplate the “gaze of Jesus”.⁶ This penetrative, incisive, insightful, comprehensive and compassionate gaze of Jesus loved all of creation in a way that was “far removed from philosophies which despised the body, matter and the things of the world. Such unhealthy dualisms, nonetheless, have left a mark on certain Christian thinkers in the course of history and disfigured the Gospel.”⁷ We must admit that the hegemonic, triumphalist periods of Christian history and so-called ‘Christendom’ have brought Christianity to disrepute and ruin to many parts of our world.

Western thought, at large, has developed a fragmentary, dualistic and anthropocentric view of reality. Pope Francis unearths the so-called “human roots of the ecological crisis”⁸ that undermine a harmonious, holistic and healthy view of our cosmic home. While accepting that: “Technoscience, when well directed, can produce important means of improving the quality of life,”⁹ he offers a critique of its underside—its lopsided development “according to an undifferentiated and one-dimensional [technocratic] paradigm”¹⁰ brought about by “modern anthropocentrism” that has resulted in “prizing technical thought over reality,” thereby compromising the “integral dignity” of the cosmos.¹¹

Asians, in general, and we Indians, in particular, are fortunate to inherit and innately imbibe an Indic-Mystic-Cosmic religious

consciousness that is holistic and fosters the welfare of all God's creatures—and not only that of human beings. Indian thinker Raimundo Panikkar calls this the '*cosmotheandric consciousness*' that becomes aware of, and responds to, all of reality in the dynamic intertwining of God-Wo/man-Cosmos.¹² With this deep awareness of the divine-human-nature interplay in all of reality, we become better equipped to respond the ecological crises.

As noted earlier, economics and ecumenism are intimately related to ecology. Many of the earth's rich and powerful—especially in the so-called 'First World'—are critical of Pope Francis's exhortation to adopt "new lifestyles" and "to leave behind a period of self-destruction and make a new start."¹³ This "change in lifestyle," the Pope explains, "could bring healthy pressure to bear on those who wield political, economic and social power."¹⁴ How can, we, in India, respond to this clarion call?

The inclusive and universal tone of Pope Francis is heartening in addressing "all people of goodwill,"¹⁵ saying: "We need a conversation which includes everyone, since the environmental challenge we are undergoing, and its human roots, concern and affect us all."¹⁶ He adds, "It's good for humanity and the world at large when we believers better recognize the ecological commitments which stem from our faith convictions."¹⁷ As one of his aims, Pope Francis writes, "In this Encyclical, I would like to enter into dialogue with all people about our common home;"¹⁸ and, in his "lines of approach and action," he speaks of many "dialogues".¹⁹ In India, inter-religious dialogue is always a fruitful avenue of responding to crises that affect us all.

The religions of Mother India can collaboratively inspire us to care for mother earth. The adivasi-tribal religions celebrate Mother Nature and foster an all-embracing sense of the sacred in their myths, culture, festivals and lifestyles. The Vedas look at all beings—living and nonliving—as subsisting by the same spiritual power. The whole universe becomes "one home" (*ekaneedam*; Yajur V. 32:8) and one must transcend one's ego (*ahamkara*) to enter into transcendental consciousness of the Ground of all beings.

The Koranic concepts of ‘*khalifa*’ (trusteeship) and ‘*tawheed*’ (the unity of all creatures) instruct Muslims to shoulder their responsibilities as guardians of Allah’s creation, so as to bequeath a green earth for future generations. Buddha preached an ethic of universal harmony (*dhamma*), embracing not only human beings but also all creatures. This engenders universal love with compassion (*karuna*), friendliness (*metta*), gentleness (*mudita*) and equanimity (*upekha*) towards all beings.

The Pope writes: “As Christians, we are also called to accept the world as *a sacrament of communion*, as a way of sharing with God and our neighbours on a global scale. It is our humble conviction that the divine and the human meet in the slightest detail in the seamless garment of God’s creation, in the last speck of dust of our planet.”²⁰ Do we really “see God in everything and everything in God” as mystics like Ignatius of Loyola and Francis of Assisi saw?

Pope Francis’s ecological are deeply Trinitarian. He writes:

The divine Persons are subsistent relations, and the world, created according to the divine model, is a web of relationships. Creatures tend towards God, and in turn it is proper to every living being to tend towards other things, so that throughout the universe we can find any number of constant and secretly interwoven relationships. ... The human person grows more, matures more and is sanctified more to the extent that s/he enters into relationships, going out from themselves to live in communion with God, with others and with all creatures. In this way, they make their own that Trinitarian dynamism which God imprinted in them when they were created. Everything is interconnected, and this invites us to develop a spirituality of that global solidarity which flows from the mystery of the Trinity.

It's clear that to care for our earthly home, we need 'gharvapasi' and creative, committed and collaborative 'homework' among entrepreneurs, economists, ecumenists, scientists, politicians and policymakers, worldwide. If we concertedly commit ourselves to what Pope Francis calls "integral ecology,"²¹ then all of creation will joyously sing, "*Laudato Si*! Praised be God!" as we journey along green pastures towards Our Father's House. 🌿

Notes

¹ This article reflects upon the recently released Encyclical Letter '*Laudato Si*' [Praise be to You] of the Holy Father Francis on the Care for our Common Home (Vatican: St. Peter's, 2015). The Letter was aptly given on May 24, 2015, the Solemnity of Pentecost. This document will hereafter be abbreviated as 'LS' with a number appearing thereafter referring to the number in the encyclical.

² See LS 21.

³ See LS 49.

⁴ See Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit and Tremper Longman III, eds. *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Illinois and Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 393-395, s.v. 'Home, House' for further details.

⁵ See LS 216-217. The direct quote is from LS 217.

⁶ See LS chapter 2, section 7, nn. 96-100.

⁷ See LS 98.

⁸ Chapter 3 of LS is entitled: "The Human Roots of the Ecological Crisis".

⁹ See LS 103.

¹⁰ See LS 106.

¹¹ Chapter 3, section III of LS is more specifically entitled: "The Crisis and Effects of Modern Anthropocentrism." Quoted phrases from LS 115.

¹² The works of Panikkar are numerous. This idea appears in many of his writings—most notably in his final three works towards the end of his life: (a) *Christophany: The Fullness of Man*, trans. a. DiLascia (New York: Orbis Books, 2004); (b) *The Experience of God: Icons of the Mystery*, trans. J. Cunneen (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006); and (c) *The Rhythm of Being* (New York: Orbis Books, 2010).

¹³ See LS 207.

¹⁴ See LS 206.

¹⁵ See LS 62.

¹⁶ See LS 14.

¹⁷ See LS 64.

¹⁸ See *LS* 3.

¹⁹ See Chapter 5 entitled “Lines of Approach and Action,” *LS* 163-201.

²⁰ See *LS* 9. Italics added.

²¹ See *LS* 62, 124, and chapter 4, nn.137ff.

Quotes from *Laudato Si'*

- The Sacraments are a privileged way in which nature is taken up by God to become a means of mediating supernatural life.” (235)
- Because all creatures are connected, each must be cherished with love and respect, for all of us as living creatures are dependent on one another.” (42)
- We can once more broaden our vision. We have the freedom needed to limit and direct technology; we can put it at the service of another type of progress, one which is healthier, more human, more social, more integral. (112)
- There can be no ecology without an adequate anthropology. When the human person is considered as simply one being among others, the product of chance or physical determinism, then our overall sense of responsibility wanes.(118)