

Caring for One Another: *Laudato Si'* and Harmonious Development

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The fetters of imperialism and colonization are broken forever and have faded into the pages of history. Yet the question arises deep down in our hearts, are we free to enjoy the world around us or does it still threaten us? While the world is moving towards progress with exhilarating speed, humans have marched to the fringes of the earth, unaware that they may lose the grip any time. Great will be that fall! At this juncture we could hear voices that whisper, “The world stands in need of liberation, my Lord, it still has to learn to love.” Have the freedom and progress we have acquired escaped from our hands? *Laudato Si* “praise be to you” the encyclical of Pope Francis places before us certain challenges to get back the grip that we have lost and fix our feet on the ground in congruence with the nature around us.

Pope Francis’ encyclical on ecological issues was not so palatable to all. The US Republican candidate, Rick Santorum, pointed out that, “We probably are better off, leaving science to scientists and focusing on what we are really good at – theology and morality”. Why did Pope Francis officially teach about ecological issues and insist on caring for the “common home”, instead of concentrating on matters concerning faith and morals? No doubt we are in a crisis,

treading towards irreparable havoc, unless we save the earth. It is a reality beyond religion and science, a reality which is ready to consume us any time.

This essay embodies a new vision of humanity envisioned in the light of *Laudato Si'* and mentions certain practical tips to shoulder the responsibility in building a better world for the next generation. However, we deal with a few crucial environmental issues of the 21st Century which are elaborately discussed in the encyclical, because awareness is the initial step towards any desired change. Environment is an umbrella term which includes both society and nature. Hence, social and ecological problems are intertwined and this essay focuses from this angle.

1. Alarming Terrorist Attacks

Human beings are being massacred in the name of religion, language, selfish motives, hatred and war. ISIS had orchestrated more than hundred terrorist attacks by now and attacks on Syria are a nightmare for us. India has witnessed a number of terrorist attacks in the recent past. Indian Churches and other minorities are also facing a type of terrorist attack behind the garb of Hindutva ideology.

Our attitude towards nature around us is also rather violent. A kind of eco-terrorism is being operated day by day towards our Mother Earth, by our irresponsible use and abuse of the products of nature. The violence present in our hearts, as her lords and masters, plunder her, forgetting our bodies, are made up of her elements (LS 2). Mercilessly we chop trees to make her barren, rape her relentlessly through undue mining and crush her womb. Deforestation and desertification for our comforts and to establish our kingdom is a terrorist attack we inflict on our Mother Earth.

We choke her with polluted air, threaten her with noise. Pollution caused by transport, industry, farms and smoke from fuels used in cooking or heating are hazards to the eco-system (LS 20). In the name of technology, progress and amassing wealth, we are all partners in this act of terrorism. Who will fight against this and bring justice to Mother Earth?

2. Voiceless Refugees

“A refugee is someone who has been forcibly displaced because of war, persecution ethnic violence or human rights violation.” We are aware of the Rohingyas of Myanmar who had to flee away from their country. The war stricken eastern countries have sent out millions as migrants. Among the 66 million displaced persons in the world, almost 23 million are from Syria, Afghanistan and South Sudan. They are the vulnerable people of the society and their children have lost their childhood forever. To be a refugee is terrible! Are only human beings made refugees?

A large number of animals and birds are migrating to other places due to climate changes or in search of food. Since forests and woodlands are plundered for our economy, commerce, production and comforts, animals and plants have lost their habitats. Birds and insects disappear due to ergotoxines used for agriculture. We destroy innumerable variety of microorganisms which are required to maintain the equilibrium of the ecosystem (LS 34). “Each year sees the disappearance of thousands of plant and animal species which we will never know, which our children will never see, because they have been lost forever. The great majority become extinct for reasons related to human activity” (LS 33).

3. Degradation of Value System

We live in a world of constant change which *Laudato Si* phrases as ‘rapidification’. This constant change is not geared to common good and becomes a source of anxiety rather than sustainable human development (LS 18). In the name of change, we are slowly losing the ground of our value system. Interconnectedness and interdependence have given way for individualism and selfishness. ‘Might is right’ is our slogan and we fail to respect life and others. *Laudato Si* elaborates a few anti-cultural values that we are treading towards which in turn create a devastating climate change (LS 23-26).

a. Throw Away Culture

Our throw away culture reduces things to rubbish and fails to reuse and recycle them. Pope Francis states, that “The earth, our home, is beginning to look more and more like an immense pile of filth” (LS 21-22).

b. Culture of Corruption

In recent years values of honesty and truthfulness have been downgraded. Corruption is the ruling principle. Our activities have corrupted the planet earth too. The satellite pictures paint earth as a blue planet covered with water. Major corruption and contamination are done against the blue blanket of the earth. The Papal document *Laudato Si* speaks vehemently against water issues. The availability of fresh drinking water is diminishing. The quality of water available to the poor is unsafe resulting in many deaths (LS 28-29).

c. Culture of Indifference

In this digital world we entertain an attitude of indifference. We are blind to the sufferings of fellow humans as well

as to the natural environment. Most of the environmental attacks gravely affect the poorest of the society. The encyclical challenges all “to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor.” (LS 49). Having created a bird’s eye view of the present scenario of our environment in the light of *Laudato Si* let us sketch ‘a new vision of humanity.’

4. A New Vision of Humanity

A native American proverb says, “We have not inherited the earth from our ancestors, we have borrowed it from our children.” Hence, we have to return it to them intact. Pope Francis asks us in *Laudato Si*, “What kind of world do we want to leave to those who come after us, to children who are now growing up?” (LS160).

a. Peaceful and Harmonious Environment

Peace was the parting gift Jesus imparted to His disciples (John 20:19). Suicidal cases, family breakdown, health hazards, emotional imbalances, anxiety, stress, intolerance, loneliness and hopelessness are on high ranking level than in the past. The gigantic task that lies before us is to establish peace with oneself, others and nature. In *Laudato Si* Pope Francis says peace does not mean absence of sufferings or war rather, “inner peace is closely related to care for ecology and for the common good” (LS 225). There is an urgent need to slow down our rat race to amass wealth and comfort, to experience the gentleness of the cool breeze, the purity of clean water and its rhythmic flow, the tranquilizing effect of greenery which fill our minds with lasting peace.

Peace overflows from within like a river to others. This is the sacred hour to join hands together to break the walls of hatred, violence, war, religious fanaticism and terrorism. We

have wounded fellow humans as well as Mother Earth. It is our obligation to bind up the wounds caused to Mother Earth and to others. Let us dream a new world for our children, “where people have food and houses and enjoyable work, where animals and plants and human beings live together on earth in harmony, where none shall hurt and destroy”. This was God’s vision we read in the book of Isaiah: “For I am about to create a new heaven and a new earth; ...no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it or the cry of the distress...” (Is 65:17-25).

b. Interdependent and Interconnected Environment

The universe in which we live is one, interrelated yet diverse and complex. It is an indivisible reality. A greater awareness of interdependence will eradicate a number of ecological abuses and exploitation (LS 265). We have evolved together with the cosmos and are entirely dependent on certain conditions of the earth such as water, air, food, climate, land etc. In fact, we came into existence much later. In the Bible we read “The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it” (Ps 24:1). The early Christian anthropology has wrongly interpreted human relationship with world and they considered themselves as masters of all. Instead of dominating, we need to be responsible stewards. Hence, we need to move from anthropocentrism to interconnectedness (LS 115-119).

However, human degradation and nature degradation are two sides of the same coin. Poverty is an ecological problem as much as violation of biodiversity of nature. Thus interconnectedness and interdependence must encourage us to raise the standard of living of our poor sisters and brothers. *Laudato Si* also summons us to protect the human embryo – the

most vulnerable beings (LS 120). Thus, *Laudato Si* invites the whole of humanity to be harbingers of a culture of life.

c. A Clean Environment

The greatest gift we give to the next generation might be a clean environment. We have already seen how our environment looks like a pile of filth through human activities. Let our rivers flow clean, free of sewage and other industrial waste, design plastic-free surroundings. The Modi Government has taken up the project of ‘Swachh Bharath’ to ensure cleanliness. We are in crisis not because we lack projects rather serious implementation of it. In our country primarily, we need to get rid of our constant habit of throwing things haphazardly or littering, spitting and urinating anywhere. Clean environment requires fresh air. Reduction of green gas effect and other causes of global warming have to be tackled, otherwise our children will be strangled to death. Pure water, fresh air and a noise free environment will make the next generation healthy and vibrant.

d. Eco-Just Environment

“The human environment and the natural environment deteriorate together; we cannot adequately combat environmental degradation unless we attend to causes related to human and social degradation” (LS 48). We have become so insensitive to the weaker sections of society and push them mercilessly to the periphery. While we try to show justice to nature let us also embrace the least, last and lost in the society. To elicit a few examples, during Modi’s regime a coal-fired power plant ‘Mundra Ultra Mega Power Project’ was built at Mundra in Gujarat. It destroyed the environment that had sustained local fishing and business for generations. The Global Hunger Index ranked India 97th among 118 countries.

The studies by World Food Programme show that one person in eight goes hungry each night though we have sufficient food to feed the entire 7 billion people. Are we living in a just society? Eco- Justice requires of us to respect the intrinsic worth of earth and all its components. Even, if we do not see a purpose for their existence, the Creator has a purpose and has endowed them with an intrinsic value.

e. Sustainably Developing Environment

Brundtland Commission defines, “Sustainable development is, development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”. The present efforts to growth are quick, overdrawn from the natural resources and without the vision of future generations. In fact, we borrow environmental capital from the future generation without the consciousness of repaying it back. However, sustainable development not only takes account of the future but also embraces all while protecting nature. It is not a shallow economic progress that we envision for the future, rather a wholesome development which sustains both social and ecological environment.

The behaviour of those who constantly consume and destroy is unsustainable which deprives some others of living a life worthy of their human dignity. This has given rise to disparity among nations. The principle of the maximization of profits, frequently isolated from other considerations is a wrong concept of economy. In case of poverty and environmental degradation both politics and the economy tend to blame each other. While one group tries to stabilize the financial gain, the other establishes the power and the weaker sections of the society pay the price. Today we require a politics which is far sighted and capable of a new, integral

and interdisciplinary approach to handle the different aspects of the crisis, able to work in hand with the economy (LS 193-198). Thus, we may present to the future a sustainably developing environment to burn their torch.

f. Eco- Spiritual Environment

Humans are psycho-spiritual-social-rational beings. Therefore, every person has an aspiration to be in communion with the divine. In order to create an eco-spiritual environment, we need to undergo an “ecological conversion”, which enables us to be more passionately engaged in the protection of the world.

Living our vocation to be protectors of God’s handiwork is an essential virtue. Quoting the example of Saint Francis of Assisi, from whose canticle Pope Francis borrowed the title of the book itself, attempts to unravel the spiritual depth we can gain from nature. Healthy relationship with creation enabled the conversion of Saint Francis of Assisi and filled his heart with tenderness. The encyclical asks us, to recognize the world as God’s loving gift, with gratitude and gratuitousness. Universal communion, dialogue and an ecological conversion can inspire us to greater creativity and enthusiasm in resolving the world’s problems. *Laudato Si* also suggests a number of practical tips to enhance our spirituality namely, be happy with little, return to simplicity that allows us to stop and appreciate the small things, be grateful for the opportunities life affords us, be spiritually detached from what we possess and not to succumb to sadness for what we lack (LS 216-226).

Above all, it teaches us that eco-spirituality is part of the spiritual quest of every religion which would bring greater communion among people of different religions. In real-

ity every religion has a close association with nature. The second chapter of the book clearly depicts how Christianity is closely associated with nature and places before us the grave responsibility to save nature. Hence creating a school of eco-spirituality in union with various religions will definitely help the next generation to live as children of God and to experience Him significantly in nature.

Having spelt out our vision as contributed by *Laudato Si*, let us draw up a concrete action plan for a new life style.

5. A New Life Style

- Make a shift from consumerist life style and throw away culture. Avoid wasting food items. Segregate wet and dry waste at homes and institutes. Cultivate personal vegetable garden and buy local products.
- Clean up after our use: Let “reuse, recycle and reduce” be our motto. Use water sparingly. In our schools and other institutes, recycle the water we use in wash rooms and reuse it. Encourage rain harvesting and adopt agricultural crops based on seasons. Recycle the used paper and use it sparingly.
- Conserve energy: Our travel can be by walk or bicycles for short distances and avoid the luxury of travelling in private vehicles often. Reduce the use of decorative lights and even number of lights in a room and switch off immediately after our use than being careless.
- Ecological education: Introduce protection of environment as a practical subject in seminaries and religious institutes, especially in our schools. Make Interreligious gatherings and political forum for discussions on this theme.