



# REDEMPTIO

Reflections on Social Ministry - Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation (SM - JPIC)

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## «Redemptorists and Environmental Justice»

### Introduction

For most of us until recently, Wuhan was an unknown name, the name of a city with which no one would ever imagine having any connection. When the news announced the onset of a possible epidemic in this city, we all regarded it as a distant reality, like many others before it. But more and more, we came to realize how it was gradually approaching our continent, our country, our city, our neighborhood, our family, until it touched our closest friends and - in many ways - our very selves. This is perhaps a metaphor that can reflect our attitude towards the "cry of the earth and the cry of the poor," as Pope Francis refers to the current ecological crisis. It is a reality that seems distant from us and not urgent because it is not touching us directly. Still, the truth is that gradually but progressively, we are already feeling its effects. The mass media report daily the dramatic ecological disasters that have their direct causes in human beings' actions during the last decades. According to independent analyses by NASA and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), 2016 recorded the highest temperatures on the Earth's surface since they began to be recorded in 1880. Everything indicates that it is highly likely that this threshold will continue to be exceeded.

The degradation of ecosystems and the Earth in general is one of the great dangers we face today, and yet we continue to close our ears and hearts to the cry of the Earth and the cry of the poor. We have failed to realize that our life depends on the other life systems. If anything has become evident during this pandemic, it is our interconnectedness.

The current climatic reality, the loss of biodiversity, and the degradation of vital spaces are not an accident or the consequence of nature's dynamics. No! They are a direct consequence of our disconnection with the Creator and his Creation. This situation has led us to assume choices and lifestyles that directly affect our relationship with nature. For centuries we had believed that nature was inferior to us, that it was an inhospitable "something" that had to be tamed and "transformed" and to which we had no bond of responsibility. But slowly, we have come to understand that when we speak of the Earth or nature, we are referring to the interactions and reactions that exist within it and within which we are playing a determining role. That is to say, we have come to understand that the health of our Planet and humanity's future are inseparable.

Many might ask: should the Christian believer be concerned with the ecological problem? Is it not one of those many fashionable topics that are discussed today and then lose momentum? Should not the religious sphere be concerned instead with 'religious things'? And it is precisely this type of questioning

that reveals to us the degree of disintegration in which we find ourselves. A large part of the solution to environmental problems will indeed depend on policies at the global level, adopted and led mainly by the developed countries and the powerful, which leaves us in a position of impotence in the face of this reality. But our responsibility is not (in principle) political but fundamentally Christian. Our strength and capacity for change lie not in our economic or political muscle but in that truth that proclaims faith in "the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible." Connecting with this truth of faith means restoring sacredness to life and all Creation, thus moving forward on reconciliation and healing paths. And it is from there that we Christians can confront the current ecological threat.

Our Constitutions states: "Preference for situations where there is a pastoral need, that is, for evangelization in the strict sense together with the choice in favor of the poor is the very reason why the Congregation exists in the Church and is the badge of its fidelity to the vocation it has received." (Const. 5). Our spirituality has always moved us to listen to the cry of the poor. Now our understanding of the poor extends also to our devastated and impoverished land. Therefore, for us, listening to the cry of the Earth and the cry of the poor is listening to the cry of God, which moves us to make choices and to act in accordance with these choices. This listening is what drives us to be spokespersons for those who have no voice. This is not difficult listening because these are voices that are close to us and within us. The ecological crisis has put those who were already vulnerable in a situation of vulnerability, and the effects of the current pandemic have aggravated this situation. It is not difficult to hear these voices. Consequently, by committing ourselves to environmental justice and ecological conversion, we are honoring our following of the Redeemer who came into the world to give us life in abundance.

How are the cry of the Earth and the cry of the poor touching our spirituality, economy, formation, and pastoral ministry? These are questions of relevance for the Redemptorists today. With the present material, we want to promote a scenario for creating awareness and look for alternatives to the environmental problem.

## **Seeing Our wounded world**

Scientific and academic circles have been discussing at length the influence and pressure that humans continue to exert on the Planet and, at the same time, has been changing the natural course of its evolution - and even its very geography - especially since the industrial revolution and vertiginously since the last 70 years. Human activity, predominantly the global economic system, is currently having the most significant impact on the Earth's life system. Some scholars have argued that the effect on the biosphere is like that of the great cataclysms that have affected the Planet in the past. Global warming, species extinction, deforestation, melting of the poles, contamination of water sources and acidification of the oceans, pollution, rampant consumption, increased production, and waste... these are just some of the faces of the current ecological crisis caused by human influence.

The Living Planet 2020 report (WWF) findings, for example, is one of several reports from countless scientific and academic institutions on the Planet's current state. This report provides unequivocal evidence that nature is crumbling; it is a loudspeaker for the cry of the Earth, revealing how its rich diversity continues to diminish at an alarming rate, significantly impacting the poorest. And, of course, the causes always point directly to the human hand.

Over the past few decades, nature has been transformed at an unprecedented rate. We are taking the Earth's resources and degrading it at a rate unseen in millions of years, to a point where it cannot recover. We relate to nature as if it were an enemy, refusing to accept that our future is deeply connected to all life on Earth. This report, like many others, warns us that if we do not act now, the world as we know it today may fall into a state of irreversible degradation.

The ecological crisis is an undeniable reality, but its consequences are unpredictable. The sense of urgency towards a "deep cultural and systemic change that values nature" is also repeated again and again from many angles of society. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report noted in 2018 that "far-reaching and unprecedented changes are needed in all aspects of society" to limit global warming to 1.5 °C instead of 2° as had been set out in the Paris agreement, to avoid severe climate change impacts. Globally, climate change is expected "to deliver a devastating combination of adverse implications for the world's poor, both because of geography and low income, making adaptation to climate change much more difficult (UN).

The UN Secretary-General has warned that if we are unable to reconcile ourselves with nature and change the current environmental situation, we are condemned to live through catastrophic situations that are worse than those we have already seen, and which are irreversible. We live in a spiral of destruction, and we are bequeathing to future generations not only a destroyed and plundered environment but also an unpayable economic and environmental debt. The current economic system and lifestyle have been built on ideas such as "more is better," "producing more and more efficiently is the engine of development," or that "unlimited consumption is the basis for the quality of life." Besides being an illusion, these ideas are destructive because they push us into a spiral of self-destruction. Perhaps this generation will not reach the bottom of this serious problem, but the next generations will be the heirs of the destruction and debt we are feeding today.

The term "Anthropocene" has emerged among scientists, journalists, scholars, and the general public to describe this drastic impact humans have had on nature over the past 70 years. It was first used in 2000 by atmospheric chemistry researcher and Nobel Prize winner Paul Crutzen during a conference. It has recently been suggested that the Anthropocene's onset should be dated to the early 20th century when a "Great Acceleration" in human activity occurred that caused such drastic changes in the state and functioning of the Earth as it had not done in millions of years before. "The Great Acceleration" was measured by some indicators published in 2004 that showed how during the last 50 years, the most profound transformations in the relationship of human beings with nature had taken place. If we think that nature needs between five and ten million years to renew the Earth with new species, we can measure man's impact on the created world. Another way to measure it is to think that it will take 200,000 generations before the biodiversity that humans have managed to destroy in just a few decades can be recovered. These are schemes that help us measure the magnitude, speed, and impact that humans have on Earth.

The explosion of global trade, consumption, and human population growth, together with rapid urban development, are the main factors that continue to influence the accelerated degradation of nature. This situation confirms that the world's leaders and the Planet's inhabitants must find common paths for sustainable development and care for Creation.

## **Assessing Development for What and Whom and at Whose Cost?**

Generally, the human wellbeing and economic development of countries is measured in terms of gross domestic product (GDP). Still, many consider this indicator obsolete because it is not aligned with sustainable development and because it does not consider the environment by overemphasizing economic and productive factors. Indeed, profit maximization cannot be the only tool for measuring development. By measuring foremost market transactions, we lose sight of the relationship with nature and its Creator. This is a misleading measure as it does not measure human welfare in its totality. The purpose of development should always be a life of dignity and wellbeing for each person and the Planet. Many studies and statistics lead us to conclude that GDP is an extremely limited and inadequate indicator of the quality of life because it loses sight of what is important. It has also been argued that GDP growth will undoubtedly harm the environment by increasingly favoring its instability.

In this sense, Pope Francis has been inviting us to re-establish our connection with the Created and with our Creator to heal this wounded world's wounds. Thus, the Dicastery for Integral Human Development has established seven *Laudato Si* goals as a proxy measure that allows us to evaluate not only a Christian understanding of wellbeing but also to "measure" our conversion toward an integral ecology

The current situation offers us an opportunity to prove that we are learning from our mistakes and being good stewards of the task entrusted to us. In the Redemptorist sphere, the current ecological crisis offers us a chance to revitalize our pastoral ministry and to show the relevance of our charism in a wounded world. Therefore, the path of ecological conversion and the call to action, which are becoming ever more urgent, become for us one of the ways of bearing witness to the Redeemer in today's world. And since we can only protect what we love, it is becoming increasingly important to raise our awareness of the need to restore our relationship with nature and welcome it as our sister, as the world we are a part. Ultimately, it is not about seeing ourselves as the saviors of the environment and other species of life, but rather, it is about seeing ourselves as part of this complex web of life that we call Earth and within which we have received a special task from our Creator: to be custodians, defenders and promoters of life. And since a common problem requires a common solution or at least a united effort, it is here that joint reflection and action can make a difference. A pluralistic and intercultural world challenges us to join the human family in our Common Home, learning from one another as we live and proclaim the truth of Jesus Christ the Redeemer in a wounded world.

### **Acting on the *Laudato Si* Goals**

#### **1. To respond to the cry of the Earth:**

"The urgent challenge to protect our common home includes a concern to bring the whole human family together to seek a sustainable and integral development, for we know that things can change." (LS 13). The cry of the Earth is expressed in a long list of urgent issues on which we are called to act: pollution and the throwaway culture, climate change, drinking water, the loss of biodiversity, the limits of scientific progress and technology, the deterioration of the quality of life and planetary inequity. The current development model has not considered the Earth, it has been built not alongside her but against her. (Cfr. Pope Francis, Mar. 8, 2019). We are producing, consuming, transporting, building... but at what cost

to the Planet? This is a cry that reaches deaf ears every day through the news, in scientific reports, and analyses of institutions concerned about the issue, but which is blatantly ignored. After several international meetings of world leaders on the ecological reality, there is still no clear plan of action to prevent crimes against nature and change the course of our practices.

Redemptorists, aware of the call to give reason for our faith and to be instruments of hope, leaven in a wounded world (cf. Const. 10, 42), want to listen to the cry of the Earth and the poor to walk the path of ecological conversion. Our conscience tells us that our existence is directly related to that of the Planet and that we need to take action, first of all in our lives, to awaken the collective conscience in our Congregation and the world to the cry of the Earth.

- *How does the cry of the Earth manifest itself in my immediate surroundings?*
- *Do I know from where do the energy and resources consumed in my home and community come? Do I know the impact they have on the environment? How are they produced?*
- *What do we mean when we talk about development? Development for whom? Development for what? Development at whose cost?*
- *Is development possible by destroying the source of development: our common home?*

## **2. To respond to the cry of the poor**

*Laudato Si* has clearly shown the intimate connection between the marginalized and the ecological crisis. That is why the option for the poor, which is at the heart of the Gospel and our Constitutions, must also be a decisive option for the Earth. For Christians in general, and Redemptorists in particular, care for the Earth is a matter of justice and solidarity with the impoverished. In this sense, the call to solidarity made by the last General Chapter resonates even more strongly before the cry of the Earth and the cry of the poor. While the poor have contributed the least to the Planet's degradation, it is they who continue to bear the worst consequences of this degradation. Thus, the defense of the environment becomes an element of the option for the poorest since the option for the poor implies an affirmation of the universal destination of goods and the defense of this most basic and universal common good, which is Creation.

- *How does the cry of the Poor manifest itself in my immediate surroundings?*
- *How is the current development model failing the Planet and the poor?*
- *What is the relationship between the cry of the Earth and the cry of the poor?*

## **3. Towards a Green Economy**

The logic of competition, profit maximization, and unlimited growth has been shaping our being as individuals and societies in recent decades. Although it has brought many benefits in terms of wealth creation, resource optimization, and certain human wellbeing, it has left aside the person's integral wellbeing and the healthy relationship with nature. An example of this is that the current economic model,

whose success is measured in economic growth, has been incapable of measuring environmental results and integral human development. It is a system that ignores the fact that human wellbeing is subordinated to the integrity of Creation. The values of the capitalist market economy: performance, competition, growth cannot go alone. They should be accompanied by gratuitousness, the common good, and reciprocity to effectively favor the quality of life. Human ingenuity does not seem to realize that it is impossible to build the common good and unlimited development based on a limited planet.

Thus, *Laudato Si* challenges us to seek other ways of understanding and pursue progress (16) to be at the service of the promotion of life, especially of the poorest. In recent years, dissatisfaction with the current economic model has arisen, generating new visions that seek to respond to the current ecological crisis. In this sense, Pope Francis affirms that we need "an economic ecology, capable of forcing us to consider reality in a broader way" (LS 141). Integral ecology demands a new economic conception in which wealth production can improve rather than destroy our world (cf. LS 129).

The call is to deepen our economy's ecological dimension and our consumption model, moving towards more sustainable production models -such as the circular economy- and fair trade. It is possible to think of a more humane economy. In his message for the "*Economy of Francesco*" event, the Pope affirmed that it is necessary to correct growth models that are incapable of guaranteeing respect for the environment, the acceptance of life, care for the family, social equity, the dignity of workers and the rights of future generations. Unfortunately, the call to become aware of the seriousness of the problems and, above all, to implement a new economic model that is the fruit of a culture of communion and is based on fraternity and equity remains unheeded.

- *What kind of "good practices" could we incorporate in our communities and the Congregation to promote an ethical dimension of the economy in line with integral ecology?*
- *To what extent could the nature surrounding us be conceived, within our accounting exercises, as part of our capital?*

#### **4. Adoption of a simple lifestyle**

The call to live a simple lifestyle is an element with which we identify within the Redemptorist imaginary. It is, in fact, the way Redemptorists participate in the mystery of Christ (Const. 20). In this regard, the Pope affirms that "Christian spirituality proposes a growth in sobriety and a capacity to enjoy with little. It is a return to simplicity that allows us to stop and appreciate the small things, be grateful for the possibilities that life offers without being attached to what we have or saddened by what we do not possess. This means avoiding the dynamics of domination and the mere accumulation of pleasures" (LS, 222). It is not difficult to fall into a throwaway lifestyle today, but this lifestyle needs to change if we want to heal our wounded world and be in solidarity with the poor. "Growth with sobriety and a capacity to enjoy with little" (LS 222) has been the testimony received from many Redemptorists; they have listened to the Spirit who frees us from that deceitful tendency to accumulate and who moves us to solidarity with our wounded world. Nor is it difficult for us to recover that sober lifestyle to which our ancestors have been faithful witnesses. This lifestyle allows us to incarnate solidarity with the poor and the wounded world of today.

- *Am I aware of the ethical implications of activities such as buying, selling, investing, producing, consuming...?*
- *Have you ever thought about the resources that are consumed and then discarded? Where do they end up? Does the Planet manage to absorb them?*
- *Can sobriety be liberating? How is our option for the poor reflected in our lifestyle?*

## 5. Ecological Education

Education is a fundamental element in achieving an ecological conversion that transforms our relationships with our Creator, our brothers and sisters, and Creation in general. Thus, " Education in integral ecology can contribute to this conversion if it includes an initiation to contemplation and care for every life and all creation and accepts the necessity of broadening our horizons to recognize the profound connection between various emerging problems." (Holy See Interdicasterial Working Group on Integral Ecology, p. 26).

As Redemptorists, we know that formation is a lifelong process that helps us strengthen our sense of responsibility for our vocation and for the life we have received. Today, our formation processes must include the formation of awareness of the environmental reality, or we could also say, of environmental justice. The formation programs of future Redemptorists and our partners in mission should give an important place to the social doctrine of the Church in the perspective of integral ecology and environmental justice.

- *What should be the role and impact of education in transforming human beings' relationship with each other and with the Earth?*
- *What kind of lifestyle should promote the formation of consecrated and lay Redemptorists?*

## 6. An Ecological Spirituality

The roots of the current ecological crisis are deeply spiritual: human beings have ignored the plans of a Creator God in favor of individual interests and the illusion of unlimited economic progress; we have introduced a rupture between ourselves, our Creator, and nature, pretending to be gods placing ourselves outside of nature, when we are part of it. This is why Pope Francis calls us to promote an "ecological spirituality" that overcomes the anthropocentric arrogance that defines our relationship with nature. It is a spirituality that must recover an attitude of respect, wonder, contemplation, and gratitude in the face of the created world. "We are not God. The earth has been here before us and has been given to us as a gift" (LS 67). Renouncing our place as God and assuming our position as creatures in this world is undoubtedly the starting point to get out of this " self-destructive behavior" (LS 55).

This call allows us to engage in an enriching dialogue with the rich spiritual tradition throughout the Congregation's history. Our faith convictions and our spiritual tradition offer us "great motivations for the care of nature and of our most fragile brothers and sisters" (LS 64). Thus, we need to restore ecology to the realm of the sacred, where God's preferential love for the poor embraces the wounded world as

well. Our greatest contribution as religious to the current ecological crisis is to restore the sacredness of the Created and the links with their Creator.

- *How is the rich tradition of Redemptorist spirituality connected to care for the Common Home?*
- *On Feb. 9, 2019, the Pope invited the professors and students of the Alphonsian Academy to recognize the reality of sin against nature, of which almost no one confesses. How is the reality of this sin articulated within our theological and spiritual tradition?*

## **7. Active participation at the local, regional, national, and international levels.**

Many of the substantial environmental matters depend on higher administrative levels, such as national governments, international organizations, and multinationals. But it is also true that the capacity for change at the local level to address the environmental crisis can have a considerable impact. Encouraging citizen participation and community engagement at the local and regional levels, articulated with policies at the global level, is the seed for creativity and change. Everything we can do to favor the care of our Common Home counts and are an expression of the universal fraternity to which we are all called. How much more time must pass (if there is still time) before we manage to admit all the problems we have created on our Earth? How many more living species have to disappear? How far does global warming have to rise before we can recognize that there is an environmental problem? These are questions that can move us to take concrete steps at the individual level and at our local communities' level to act as the leaven in the dough. This is a quest that connects us from the local level with the global consciousness that cries out for our Common Home care.

- *How can I orient my pastoral ministry to be consistent with the call to care for the Common Home?*
- *How can I integrate the promoting integral ecology in my pastoral ministry?*

## **Conclusion**

Six years after the promulgation of the encyclical *Laudato Si*, the call to ecological conversion continues to grow ever more urgent. The Redemptorist Congregation, as a community of conversion, and participating in the Church's mission, welcomes the call of Pope Francis and strives to renew its criteria for action in the face of the cry of the Earth and the cry of the poor. The Congregation seeks to interpret and understand current problems and the relationship between them in the light of the values proposed in *Laudato Si*. We are not indifferent to the deterioration of "the Common Home." If anything has characterized the Congregation within the ecclesial body, it is its moral proposal that seeks to heal and restore the relationship with our Creator. For this reason, the Congregation welcomes *Laudato Si* as a precious contribution to Christian moral theology and humanity. It feels called to read it based on our charism and foster its spirit within its members' apostolic life.

*General Commission for  
Social Ministry - Justice, Peace, and Integrity of Creation*