

Laudato Si': An Indian Perspective

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Abstract

The Indian context is one of religious and cultural pluralism and massive poverty. Despite the reverence for the earth ingrained by its major religions, it has suffered enormous ecological devastation. In the encyclical *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis may very well be addressing India directly. In this article the author highlights its relevance and stresses the necessity of entering into dialogue with the major religions and the poor. In this way, in solidarity with all people, we can strive to recover our God-given place as creatures that share a bond of kinship with all created realities, heal the wounds inflicted on creation and render justice to the victims of ecological degradation.

Keywords

ecological conversion, ecology, Indian theology, interreligious dialogue, *Laudato Si'*, poverty, social justice

Laudato Si' was received enthusiastically in India.¹ Theologians were quick to praise the document. Felix Wilfred called it “a jewel in the crown of the social teachings of the Church, and a great contribution to humanity grappling with the

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1. Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'* (May 24, 2015) (hereafter cited in text as *LS*), http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_encyclica-laudato-si.html. See “Asian Churches Plan to Delve into Pope’s Encyclical,” *Vatican Radio*,

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environmental crisis.”² Michael Amaladoss found the spirituality of creation in *Laudato Si’* something great, holistic, and original: “This is very attractive especially to the Easterners like us.”³ Support for the encyclical also came from large sections of the media. The well-known scientist and environmental activist, Vandana Shiva, was enthusiastic:

This resonates so deeply with the Indian philosophy of *VasudhaivKutumbkanv* [sic], the Earth Family. It resonates with the contemporary movement for the Rights of Mother Earth. It resonates with cultures and faiths across the world. The encyclical is an invitation to “a new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of the planet” (LS 14) and this includes biodiversity, air, water, oceans. It is clear that “to protect our common home we need to bring the whole family together” (LS 13).⁴

A Hindu statesman and President of the Universal Society of Hinduism, Rajan Zed, praised the pope for his call to respect and protect the environment. He appreciated the pope’s highlighting of the issues linking the care of the natural world with justice for the poorest and hoped that the encyclical will help shape public policy and bring about change in the behavior of people.⁵

In welcoming the encyclical, Sudheendhra Kulkarni, a former adviser to the Indian Prime Minister and an ideologue of the ruling Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party, challenged Hindu religious leaders to “emulate the Pope and place their full weight behind worldwide religious leaders’ collective protest, advocacy and action on ending poverty, socio-economic injustice and inequality, ending environmental degradation, and also ending wars and violent conflicts.”⁶ The Kolkata daily, *The Telegraph*, offered front-page coverage to *Laudato Si’* and the pope’s appeal to hear the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor.⁷ The response to *Laudato Si’* in India

June 20, 2015, http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2015/06/20/asian_churches_plan_to_delve_into_popes_encyclical/1152951. The Catholic Bishops’ Conference of India also decided to focus on ecological justice as part of its celebration of Justice Sunday. Sandy Cornish, “Ecological Justice Focus of Indian Bishops Justice Sunday Message,” *Social Spirituality* (blog), August 11, 2015, <http://social-spirituality.net/indian-bishops-ecological-justice/>.

2. Felix Wilfred, “Theological Significance of *Laudato Si’*: An Asian Reading,” *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection* 79 (2015) 645–61 at 661.
3. Michael Amaladoss, “A Spirituality of Creation according to Pope Francis,” *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection* 79 (2015) 565–78 at 575.
4. Vandana Shiva, “*Laudato Si’*—A 21st Century Manifesto for Earth Democracy,” *L’Huffington Post Italia*, June 20, 2015, <http://seedfreedom.info/laudato-si-a-21st-century-manifesto-for-earth-democracy/>.
5. “Hindus Commend Pope’s Plea for Environmental Protection in 1st Encyclical,” *World Hindu News*, June 18, 2015, <http://worldhindunews.com/2015061844740/hindus-commend-popes-plea-for-environmental-protection-in-1st-encyclical/>.
6. Sudheendra Kulkarni, “The Flowers of Papa Francesco,” *Outlook*, August 3, 2015, <http://www.outlookindia.com/article/the-flowers-of-papa-francesco/294917>.
7. “On Same Side of Earth: Faith and Science—Pope’s Climate Crusade,” *The Telegraph*, June 18, 2015, http://www.telegraphindia.com/1150619/jsp/frontpage/story_26614.jsp#.VkBQVdIrLIU.

is not surprising. *Laudato Si'* has given voice to the decades-long cry of the environmentalists and is a shot in the arm to nongovernmental organizations working to protect the environment.

Pope Francis's thoughts are not entirely original. They are based largely on the teachings of his two immediate predecessors and the publications of several bishops' conferences and theologians as well as on the best scientific data available. Nevertheless, the encyclical is written in a powerful and sometimes poetical manner and in a language easily accessible to all people. And one can still say that *Laudato Si'* marks an important stage in the development of the social teaching of the church. It has broadened the concept of "social." In the past, the term by and large suggested the demands of justice and solidarity inter-human and inter-community relationships. The pope now extends it to the world of nature and "calls out the world of humans to enter into a harmonious relationship with it and attend to its rhythm."⁸

***Laudato Si'* and India**

India is a strange mixture of the old and the new, a land of contradictions, where the majority of its people are expected each morning to beg pardon of the earth for stepping on it, while, almost blissfully, its rivers are fouled up and its environment polluted. In his statement that "the earth, our home, is beginning to look more and more like an immense pile of filth" (*LS* 21) and in his warning, "If present trends continue, this century may well witness extraordinary climate change and an unprecedented destruction of ecosystems, with serious consequences for all of us" (*LS* 24), the pope could well be addressing India directly. As Ramachandra Guha, a historian and environmentalist, states:

India today is an environmental basket case, and in at least five respects: (1) The rapid depletion of groundwater aquifers; (2) the impending or actual death of our major rivers through household sewage and industrial effluents; (3) the excessively high rates of air pollution in our cities; (4) the unregulated disposal of chemical and toxic waste; and (5) the continuing degradation of our forests and the associated loss of biodiversity. These problems have local, regional, and national impacts. Collectively considered, they raise a huge question against the sustainability of present patterns of agrarian and industrial development.⁹

It is against this background that we need to understand the teaching of *Laudato Si'*, see its relevance in the context of India, and the validity of its insights and the practical action recommended. Its message urgently needs to be implemented. *Laudato Si'* is wide-ranging and one cannot review all aspects of the document. Since the scope of this article is to provide an Indian theological perspective, we limit ourselves to two vital areas: (1) the multi-religious context of India and (2) the poor. These, in turn, shed some light on the encyclical's call to an ecological conversion.

8. Wilfred, "An Asian Reading" 8–9.

9. Ramachandra Guha, "The Environmental Challenge," <http://ramachandraguha.in/archives/the-environmental-challenge.html>.

From a Multi-Religious Perspective: Openness to the Resources of Wisdom

Especially noteworthy is that Pope Francis has cited and used a wide variety of sources in the encyclical. He has drawn freely from his predecessors and from his own teaching. Remarkably, in an exercise of collegiality in the spirit of Vatican II, he has quoted a number of episcopal conferences from around the world, many significantly from the southern part of the globe. The pope also demonstrated his spirit of openness and dialogue by quoting five times the Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomew (*LS* 8, 9). In what might be termed a wider ecumenism he quoted approvingly a Sufi mystic, Ali-al-Khawas (*LS* 159). He mentions the Rio Declaration and even acknowledges the “courageous challenge” of the Earth Charter (*LS* 207).

Pope Francis is convinced of the need for dialogue and uses the word thirty times. As he says in the introduction, “I would like to enter into dialogue with all people about our common home” (*LS* 3) and again, “this encyclical welcomes dialogue with everyone so that together we can seek paths of liberation” (*LS* 64). It is worth noting, then, that he did not choose to cite any of the sacred writings from India or even Asia that are full of texts that are very much in keeping with the sentiments expressed in *Laudato Si’*. For us in India, however, it is vital that we do take note of these resources. The church finds itself as a small minority in the midst of people numbering well over a billion and dialogue with other cultures and religions is a necessity. As the Asian Bishops observed:

In this dialogue we accept them as significant and positive elements in the economy of God’s design of salvation. In them we recognize and respect profound spiritual and ethical meanings and values. Over many centuries they have been the treasury of the religious experience of our ancestors, from which our contemporaries do not cease to draw light and strength. They have been (and continue to be) the authentic expression of the noblest longings of their hearts, and the home of their contemplation and prayer. They have helped to give shape to the histories and cultures of our nations. How then can we not give them reverence and honour? *And how can we not acknowledge that God has drawn our peoples to Himself through them?*¹⁰

Pope Francis also acknowledges this as he suggests that religions “dialogue among themselves for the sake of protecting nature, defending the poor and building networks of respect and fraternity” (*LS* 201). This process has been underway for many years in Asia. The theology that has developed as a result has come to regard contextual realities as “resources” of theology. A statement of the Indian Theological Association expresses this wisdom that India brings to the issue of the environment:

10. Gaudencio Rosales and C. Arevalo, eds., *For All the Peoples of Asia, I* (Manila: Claretian, 1992) 14. Pope John Paul II also encouraged Christians to work together with people of other faiths to promote gospel values such as justice and peace. See Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio* (July 12, 1990) 20, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_07121990_redemptoris-missio.html.

The Divine, the cosmos and human society are caught up in an integral relationship. A mystical awareness of this inter-relatedness creates an ecosophy, a wisdom that sees the earth as our home. The Indian religious *psyche* has an innate perception of the universal symbiosis which binds all beings together in one evolutionary life process. Human beings emerge from this process with a spiritual consciousness of universal harmony (*rita*) and a sense of responsibility towards the well-being of all (*dharma*). Protection of the environment then, is an ethical imperative that develops out of a mystical perception of the earth as a home in which we experience the life-giving power of the Mother Divine. Ecosophy demands that we protect mother earth so that she in turn can nourish us (*Gita* 3.11). The spirituality that grows out of this integral perception complements traditional Christian spirituality and raises pertinent questions about the ethics of today's dominant global economy. This holistic vision gives Christian theology a perspective of the unfolding of the Spirit *Logos* in and through the cosmic and human reality.¹¹

Laudato Si' reflects this wisdom from Asia and India even if it does not officially refer to any particular text from their religious scriptures. For example,

Our insistence that each human being is an image of God should not make us overlook the fact that each creature has its own purpose. None is superfluous. The entire material universe speaks of God's love, his boundless affection for us. Soil, water, mountains: everything is, as it were, a caress of God. (*LS* 85)

The universe unfolds in God, who fills it completely. Hence, there is a mystical meaning to be found in a leaf, in a mountain trail, in a dewdrop, in a poor person's face (*LS* 233).

These are expressions that resonate with the soul of India and offer a promising avenue for an ongoing dialogue with people of other faiths as we, together as co-pilgrims, seek to protect and care for the environment. It offers us the hope of articulating a common ethical response.

From the Perspective of the Poor: Eco-Justice

One of the elements that has found resonance among Indian theologians is the fact that *Laudato Si'* looks at the environment from the perspective of the poor. This is the hallmark of the theology developing in India, a theology from below, inspired by liberation theology, born out of the experience of the poor, and a theology in solidarity with the victims of history. What is crucial is a critical understanding of the historical context of this theology. This is why a proper sociocultural analysis is also required.

Given the complexity of India and its regional, cultural, and religious diversity, it is difficult to arrive at an analysis that adequately covers Indian reality. But Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha provide us with an original theoretical framework that helps us to grasp the situation with regard to ecology. They classify the country

11. Joseph Mattam and Jacob Kavunkal, *Ecological Concerns: An Indian Christian Response* (Bangalore: N.B.C.L.C., 1998) 139.

into three predominant groups: the omnivores, the ecosystem people, and the ecological refugees.¹²

The *omnivores* are the beneficiaries of modern development. They are the ones with a purchasing power that gives them access to a comfortable lifestyle and the latest luxury goods. They form a sixth of India's population. "Like their Western counterparts, whom Raymond Dasmann calls 'biosphere people,' they enjoy the produce of the entire biosphere, in contrast to the ecosystem people, who have a very limited resource catchment. Devouring everything produced all over the earth, they might equally be termed *omnivores*."¹³

The *ecosystem people* are the bulk of the poor, or even the not-so-affluent, who cannot obtain the new goods on the market, and who eke out an existence depending on the natural needs of their own locality to meet most of their material needs. Over half of the population belong to this group.¹⁴

A third of the country can be called *ecological refugees*. These are the millions of peasants and tribal peoples who have been displaced to make way for projects like dams and mines and industries. They live as displaced people on the margins of islands of prosperity "with little they can freely pick up from the natural world, but not much money to buy the commodities that the shops are brimming with either."¹⁵

In such a system, the *omnivores* with the help of state power continue to thrive, maintaining their stranglehold on natural capital, enjoying its benefits while passing on to others the cost of degradation of resources. This is blatantly unjust and it calls for structural change and conversion if justice is to be established.

The first step in this direction is protest. Unlike the West where the ecological movement began with scientists, in India the ecological movement began with the protest of the poor and the marginalized: tribal people, women, and artisanal fisher-people who saw their land, their dwellings, their lifestyle, and livelihood being threatened.¹⁶ Protest is a tool in the hands of the powerless. It is a rejection of the

12. Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha, *Ecology and Equity: The Use and Abuse of Nature in Contemporary India* (Gurgaon, India: Penguin, 1995) 3–4. While this is a helpful way to understand the structure of society, critics point to its limitations. For example, it does not take into account the vast millions of urban poor who are not displaced people. See Bas Wielenga, *Towards an Eco-just Society* (Bangalore: Centre for Social Action, 1999) 47.

13. Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha, *Ecology and Equity* 4.

14. *Ibid.* 3.

15. *Ibid.* 4.

16. Ramachandra Guha, "The Rise and Fall of Environmentalism," <http://ramachandraguha.in/archives/the-rise-and-fall-of-indian-environmentalism.html>. It is also interesting to note that there is a difference between the environmental protests of the poor and the deep ecology of the West and the implementation of the wilderness agenda that claims that intervention in nature should be guided primarily by the need to preserve biotic integrity rather than by the needs of humans. See Ramachandra Guha, "Radical American Environmentalism and Wilderness Preservation: A Third World Critique," *Environmental Ethics* 11 (1989) 71–83 at 74, doi:10.5840/enviroethics198911123.

worldview of the oppressor, a rejection of their value system and a refusal to accept their victimization. This is a first step in the process of liberation.

If theology is born out of human experience, it is especially born out of the experience of suffering—the experience of *dukha*, the suffering of the other that provokes both a prophetic rage against the perpetrators of violence and injustice and compassionate action in solidarity with the victims. It leads us to a theology “that does not seek primarily to explain evil but rather presents ways in which evil and suffering can be resisted and transformed by the Christian community and in so doing can enable Christians to live faithfully in the midst of unanswered questions as they await God’s redemption of the whole of creation.”¹⁷

Laudato Si’ impressively contains several notes of protest against the mindset and the powers that are at the root of our ecological crisis. There is a protest against the powers that arise out of a technological mind-set. The pope acknowledges the benefits that technology has brought to humankind. But along with science and technology has come power. “Never has humanity had such power over itself, yet nothing ensures that it will be used wisely, particularly when we consider how it is currently being used” (*LS* 104). John Paul II had said earlier, and it is implied in *Laudato Si’* 105, that scientists must “truly use their research and technical skill in the service of humanity,” being able to subordinate them “to moral principles and values, which respect and realize in its fullness the dignity of man.”¹⁸ The point being made is that “instrumentalism and the idolizing of human technological capacities do not take proper account of the relatedness of God’s creation.”¹⁹

Pope Francis also critiques the “Globalisation of the Technocratic Paradigm” which advocates the idea of unlimited growth that is so attractive to some economists, financiers, and experts in technology. As he states, quoting the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*:

It is based on the lie that there is an infinite supply of the earth’s goods, and this leads to the planet being squeezed dry beyond every limit. It is the false notion that “an infinite quantity of energy and resources are available, that it is possible to renew them quickly, and that the negative effects of the exploitation of the natural order can be easily absorbed.” (*LS* 106)

This myth was already called into question by the report of the Club of Rome in 1972, “Limits to Growth,” which stated that “if the present growth trends in world population, industrialisation, pollution, food production, and resource depletion continue unchanged, the limits to growth on this planet will be reached sometime within the next one hundred years. The most probable result will be a rather sudden and

17. John Swinton, *Raging with Compassion: Pastoral Responses to the Problem of Evil* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007) 4. Swinton uses the word theodicy and not theology.

18. Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (April 2, 2004) 458, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/justpeace/documents/rc_pc_justpeace_doc_20060526_compendio-dott-soc_en.html.

19. Christine Ledger, “Towards a Theology of Technology,” *Interface* 7 (May 2004) 124–29 at 127.

uncontrollable decline in both population and industrial capacity.”²⁰ As an article in the *Guardian* stated more than forty years after the publication of the report, “so far, there’s little to indicate they got that wrong.”²¹

The encyclical also critiques the nexus between technology and economic and political life:

Some circles maintain that current economics and technology will solve all environmental problems, and . . . that the problems of global hunger and poverty will be resolved simply by market growth. . . . They may not affirm such theories with words, but . . . their behaviour shows that for them maximizing profits is enough. Yet by itself the market cannot guarantee integral human development and social inclusion. (*LS* 109)

This mindset goes along with a dangerous practical relativism that says “Let us allow the invisible forces of the market to regulate the economy, and consider their impact on society and nature as collateral damage” (*LS* 123). The market forces only encourage consumerism. This same “use and throw away” logic generates so much waste, because of the “disordered desire to consume more than what is necessary” (*LS* 123).

What then is the alternative to the technocratic paradigm and the free market? Among the many responses to the ecological problem is one that is called “sustainable development.” The term came into vogue in 1987 with the publication of the Brundtland Commission Report, *Our Common Future: Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development*, which defined the term as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”²² This is a term that is open to many interpretations and can be misleading.²³ The problem lies with the use of the word “development,” which is often understood as being equivalent to “growth,” where growth is identified with economics and production alone irrespective of the cost to human beings and the environment. Perhaps the title given to the book, just cited, by Peppard and Vicini is a better choice of expression: “just sustainability.”

As Pope Benedict XVI indicated in the encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, human beings need to exercise responsibility for all of creation so that with the aid of technology the human family will live with dignity through a just sharing of resources and provide for future generations as well. As he stated, “We must recognize our grave duty to hand

20. Donella H. Meadows et al., *The Limits to Growth: A Report of the Club of Rome's Project on the Predicament of Mankind* (New York: Universe Books, 1972) 23, <http://www.donellameadows.org/wp-content/userfiles/Limits-to-Growth-digital-scan-version.pdf>.

21. Graham Turner and Cathy Alexander, “Limits to Growth Was Right: New Research Shows We’re Nearing Collapse,” September 2, 2014, *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/sep/02/limits-to-growth-was-right-new-research-shows-were-nearing-collapse>.

22. United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future* (1987), <http://www.un-documents.net/our-common-future.pdf>.

23. See Christiana Z. Peppard and Andrea Vicini, “Introduction: On Just Sustainability and Its Challenges,” in *Just Sustainability: Technology, Ecology, and Resource Extraction*, ed. Christiana Z. Peppard and Andrea Vicini (New York: Orbis, 2015) 1–10.

the earth on to future generations in such a condition that they too can worthily inhabit it and continue to cultivate it.”²⁴

A key issue underlying the crisis of ecology is the issue of justice and equity. Providing horrifying statistics, Oxfam warned in 2015 that the “combined wealth of the richest 1 percent will overtake that of the other 99 percent of people next year unless the current trend of rising inequality is checked.”²⁵ The social teaching of the church is clear on this matter. John Paul II summed it up:

On the other hand, the earth is ultimately *a common heritage, the fruits of which are for the benefit of all* . . . This has direct consequences for the problem at hand. It is manifestly unjust that a privileged few should continue to accumulate excess goods, squandering available resources, while masses of people are living in conditions of misery at the very lowest level of subsistence. Today, the dramatic threat of ecological breakdown is teaching us the extent to which greed and selfishness—both individual and collective—are contrary to the order of creation, an order which is characterized by mutual interdependence.²⁶

Drawing on the teachings of his predecessors, Pope Francis affirms the earth is essentially a shared inheritance, whose fruits are meant to benefit everyone. With the growing disparity between the privileged rich and those deprived of basic rights and considered expendable, the principle of the common good becomes “a summons to solidarity and a preferential option for the poorest of our brothers and sisters” (*LS* 158). It is not in keeping with God’s plan that his gifts be enjoyed by only a few.

Hence every ecological approach needs to incorporate a social perspective which takes into account the fundamental rights of the poor and the underprivileged. The principle of the subordination of private property to the universal destination of goods, and thus the right of everyone to their use, is a golden rule of social conduct and “the first principle of the whole ethical and social order.” (*LS* 93)

The natural environment is the patrimony of all. If we deny even a few people access to its resources, we burden our consciences, says the pope (*LS* 95).

Against this background, an important aspect of justice is found in *Laudato Si’* 51–52, where the encyclical speaks of “ecological debt.” This simply means that rich countries and the richer classes in poor countries who have had the lion’s share of the earth’s resources have the moral obligation to compensate the poorer nations and poor people. The pope also calls for an integral ecology, one which respects its human and

24. Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate* (June 29, 2009) 50, http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate.html.

25. Deborah Hardoon, *Having It All and Wanting More* (Oxfam International, 2015), <https://www.oxfam.org/en/research/wealth-having-it-all-and-wanting-more>.

26. Pope John Paul II, “Peace with God the Creator, Peace with All of Creation” (homily, Vatican City, World Day of Peace, January 1, 1990) 8, https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_19891208_xxiii-world-day-for-peace.html. Emphasis original.

social dimensions. The reason is that “We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complete crisis which is both social and environmental” (LS 139).

From a critical analysis of the encyclical it is clear that the problems of ecology are vast and complex. They demand a response on different levels. That is why the pope devotes chapter 5 to courses of action and “to outline the major paths of dialogue which can help us escape the spiral of self-destruction which currently engulfs us” (LS 163). He appeals to international bodies to establish and enforce global regulatory norms to impose obligations and prevent unacceptable actions. While aware of the many world summits on the environment, he is equally aware that “due to a lack of political will they have been unable to reach truly meaningful and effective global agreements on the environment” (LS 166).

Here one must mention the COP 21 meeting held in Paris in December 2015. It was hailed in many quarters as a success, because 195 nations adopted the first universal agreement to combat climate change. While a step forward, it left much to be desired. According to Indian environmentalist, Sunita Narain,

Developing countries have got words and promise of money while the developed countries have finally got rid of their historical responsibility of causing climate change. They have no legally binding targets on finance or emissions cuts. The phrase “historical responsibility” has been erased from the agreement and this weakens the obligations of developed countries to take actions due to their past emissions.²⁷

The COP 21 final text actually mentions that the loss and damage due to climate change “does not involve or provide a basis for any liability or compensation.”²⁸

Ecological Conversion

Using a phrase of John Paul II, Pope Francis calls for ecological conversion (LS 5).²⁹ Conversion always involves many things. It involves a new perception of who we are,

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27. “Paris Climate Deal Weak, Unambitious: Centre for Science and Environment,” *New Delhi Television*, December 13, 2015, <http://www.ndtv.com/india-news/paris-climate-deal-weak-unambitious-centre-for-science-and-environment-1254432>. See also Sunita Narain, “Let’s Respect the Other,” *Sunita Narain* (blog), *Center for Science and Environment*, January 1, 2016, <http://www.cseindia.org/content/lets-respect-other>; and “COP21 Climate Change Summit Reaches Deal in Paris,” *BBC News*, December 13, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-35084374>.
 28. United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (FCCC), Agenda item 4(b), “Adoption of the Paris Agreement,” December 12, 2015, §52, <http://unfccc.int/resource/docs/2015/cop21/eng/l09r01.pdf>.
 29. Pope John Paul II, general audience (Vatican City, January 17, 2001), https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/audiences/2001/documents/hf_jp-ii_aud_20010117.html. For more on the notion of “ecological conversion” see Neil Ormerod and Cristina Vanin, “Ecological Conversion: What Does it Mean?” *Theological Studies* 77 (2016) 328–52, DOI: 10.1177/0040563916640694.

contrasted with the image of who we are meant to be. It involves a naming of our sin and repentance and restitution. It involves a rediscovery of our God. It calls for all of these things and more on a social and personal level.

We perceive ourselves essentially as relational. But our relationality is not limited to other humans only, but also to all created realities which in God's design have intrinsic value and a right to be.³⁰ The pope also draws on the *Catechism*:

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 dependence on each other, to complete each other, in the service of each other. (*LS* 86)

We realize then that we are not just our brothers' keepers, but carry a responsibility for all creation. This is the task of preserving biodiversity.

Conversion implies a turning away from sin. In an interview in 2008, Bishop Gianfranco Girotto, an official at the Apostolic Penitentiary, spoke about "social sins" and illustrated them with examples. Among those he mentioned were economic injustice, environmental irresponsibility, accumulation of excessive wealth, and genetic experimentation with unforeseen consequences. There was great misunderstanding about this in the media, but the point he made was valid.³¹

The two environmental sins that Patrick T. McCormick and Russell B. Connors, Jr. single out are anthropocentrism and consumerism.³² They link anthropocentrism with the capital sin of pride because it

elevates humans far above the rest of creation and ignores our dependence upon or ties and duties to God's other creatures. This pride has wreaked all sorts of havoc and destruction on our world, polluting our air and water, poisoning and stripping our soil and slaughtering thousands upon thousands of our sibling species.³³

Consumerism is an addiction to the accumulation of things, and they link it with greed and envy. It "emphasizes the wants and desires of consumers while ignoring the rights and claims of the poor, of future generations and of the rest of the planet" and "leads us to forget that we are also sisters and brothers to all the other humans on the planet, and called to show a special regard for those on the margin."³⁴ It is shameful that approximately a third of all food produced is discarded, and "whenever food is thrown

30. "Each of the various creatures, willed in its own being, reflects in its own way a ray of God's infinite wisdom and goodness." *LS* 69, quoting *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 339, http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p1s2c1p5.htm.

31. James Martin, "Seven (New) Deadly Sins? Or Not?" *America*, March 10, 2008, <http://americamagazine.org/content/all-things/seven-new-deadly-sins-or-not>.

32. Patrick T. McCormick and Russell B. Connors, Jr., *Facing Ethical Issues: Dimensions of Character, Choices and Morality* (New York: Paulist, 2002) 260–69.

33. *Ibid.* 260.

34. *Ibid.* 265.

out it is as if it were stolen from the table of the poor” (*LS* 50). This is where restitution comes in and the burden is squarely placed on the privileged countries and the elite within each country to restore to the victims of their pride and greed and consumerism that which was rightfully theirs.

On the individual level, ecological conversion demands a change of attitude and a change of lifestyle. We need to realize that “being” is more important than “having.” If the world is based on having more and more there is no scope for the survival of the earth.³⁵

Conversion also implies a rediscovery of God. As Pope Francis says, “A spirituality which forgets God as all-powerful and Creator is not acceptable. That is how we end up worshipping earthly powers, or ourselves usurping the place of God, even to the point of claiming an unlimited right to trample his creation underfoot” (*LS* 75).

Conclusion

To conclude, I would like to make a few points about the nature of an Indian Christian response to ecological concerns. It begins with an awareness that we are grappling with a Mystery that envelops us, for in Him all the fullness of creation dwells. Theology is a reflection on the divine–human encounter that is continually taking place in history and in the midst of the world and especially in the struggles of the poor. It is always contextual. That is why it requires a proper sociocultural analysis that enables us to discern the movement of the Spirit and the action to which we are being summoned. It also enables us to ensure that we perceive reality through a proper lens and, in keeping with the prophetic tradition that implies a view from the underside of history, from the perspective of the victims. It is not a task undertaken in isolation but in dialogue.

We enter into dialogue with our own sources and traditions. We also seek to enter into dialogue with other religions, cultures, and the poor and thus be active participants and co-pilgrims in humanity’s search for truth. Yet at the same time we approach texts and traditions with a hermeneutic of suspicion, and in this way also rescue religions from ideological distortions and enable them to rediscover their deepest values. In the context of the environment, we need to recover our God-given place as creatures that share a bond of kinship with all created realities; to undertake the task of repairing the wounds inflicted on creation and render justice to the victims of exploitation and greed; to adopt a lifestyle whereby we learn from the Taoist maxim “to walk lightly on the earth.”³⁶ We are also being challenged to enter into the experience of suffering so that in compassionate solidarity we may give voice to the voiceless,

35. Sandra Menteth, “Planting Seeds for the Future: Building a Life-Sustaining Society,” *Compass: A Review of Topical Theology* 37 (2003), <http://compassreview.org/autumn03/2.html>.

36. Quoted in Denis Caroll, *Towards a Story of the Earth: Essays in the Theology of Creation* (Dublin: Dominican, 1987) 172.

expressing their rage against sinful structures and forces of oppression, and join God in the task of healing the world.

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