

Ecology and Theology
of Nature

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Editorial

We Humans and The Call to Protect Our Common-Home

How to inhabit our common home is a theological and ethical question of profound significance and of great urgency. It impacts individuals and communities differently around the world, exposing the inequalities and vulnerabilities that become more stark with every passing decade. *Laudato Si'* has injected a new sense of purpose into the church's engagement with ecology and theology of nature, and has situated the ethical question of how to inhabit the earth as a matter of social justice, of integral human ecology and of intergenerational solidarity. This volume of *Concilium* draws on the deep and diverse Christian tradition of reverence for nature and care for the earth, as it reflects on the theology of nature and considers the new and complex environmental challenges facing humanity.

The Christian tradition has had an ambivalent history in respect of ecological awareness. On the one hand respect for nature is evident in the foundational texts and the earliest expressions of Christian witness, and is woven through the tradition's beliefs and values, its symbols, its spirituality its ethical norms and political commitments. On the other hand, however, this respect for nature has often been neglected, or even violated, with Christian texts and traditions occasionally being deployed to plunder and destroy the natural world. Thus it is a diverse and occasionally contested tradition, with varying emphases and ongoing debates about, for example, anthropocentrism, stewardship and incarnation. Moreover, it is a tradition that has much to learn from the witness of other religious traditions and world-views, many of which advance a more harmonious and integrated approach to ecology and the natural world. This volume seeks to speak to

the urgency of the ecological challenges facing humanity by refocusing attention on the theology of nature and in so doing highlighting the significant contribution that Christian theology and praxis can make to addressing the contemporary global environmental crisis.

The volume opens with an essay from His All-Holiness, the Ecumenical Patriarch. His All-Holiness Bartholomew's profoundly theological analysis and call to action frames the entire volume, highlighting how the ecological crisis requires a holistic response. This opening essay is followed by a high-level political analysis of the nature of the environmental challenges facing humanity now. From this analysis the volume moves on to explore key biblical and theological themes as developed by theologians in different cultural and socio-economic contexts, and drawing on a range of theological approaches. In this context it discusses the witness in history of a range of theological and religious conceptualizations of the relationship between humanity and nature (in all its dimensions) focusing on the synergies, and learnings that can emerge from these engagements. The third section advances a global political and ethical analysis, focusing on macro-themes and perspectives. The final section gathers a series of shorter reflections focused on ecological praxis in the church and world, written by advocates and practitioners who work for ecological responsibility and climate justice across the globe.

Running throughout *Laudato Si'* is the conviction that humanity is facing not multiple discrete crises, but rather a single interconnected one, this central conviction of the papal Encyclical. The author begins with an incisive reference to Pope Francis insistence that the atmosphere represents a communal common-good of the entire human family, an idea that brings along the potential for an extraordinary political effect. Indeed, to legally recognize that atmosphere and climate represents a global good that pertains to all cannot but have important consequences in terms of the international law. Hence the reluctance of some states in the UN-system to go along with that kind of alliance, certainly out of fear for the legal consequences in case of unfulfilled agreements. The article, thus, explains the courageous dimension of the papal document in suggesting that the earth's atmosphere needs to be taken for what it truly is: a substantial part of the global common-good of the entire human family. The article reasserts in particular the importance of international cooperation in solving the

many issues at hand. In this sense, the author suggests important ideas on how to make sure that international cooperation becomes a concrete reality in facing the challenges of the climate change in our time, a challenge that for our author is inseparable from the preferential option for the poor.

The seriousness of the environmental crisis creates a constant new impetus towards the assessment of the Christian theological tradition through an ecological lens. Of course, the Christian preoccupation with ecology and the theology of nature is not new. Throughout the history of Christianity, East and West, major theological and ecclesiastical figures have sought to read and interpret the scriptures in ways that reaffirm the goodness of creation and to develop theological, anthropological, Christological and soteriological categories in ways that respect the integrity of the natural world. In this volume, Dianne Bergant, Leonardo Boff, Mark Hathaway and Celia Deane-Drummond address some of these foundational biblical and theological themes. Dianne Bergant reflects on the biblical metaphor *imago dei*, and confirms and develops the argument, advanced in *Laudato Si'*, that the anthropocentrism that has characterized much of the theological interpretation of the *imago dei* metaphor has been misguided and damaging and calls for a reinterpretation of this category. Leonardo Boff and Mark Hathaway also call for a rethink of the human relationship with nature by exploring another biblical metaphor, namely, the Reign of God and its links with the divine wisdom present in creation. The Sophia wisdom tradition is also the centre-piece of Celia Deane-Drummond's inter-disciplinary reflection on the fragile state of the natural world and the hope for an alternative ecological future.

As patron saint of the men and women dedicated to the struggle for a better world in ecological terms, the paradigmatic figure of Saint Francis of Assisi has a special place in this issue of *Concilium* as well. Beyond any form of simple romanticism or any form of naïveté in the political discourse, Saint Francis came, indeed as someone seriously moved by the values of the Gospel, to fulfil a fundamental role in the configuration of the medieval and post-medieval understanding of nature and the human interaction with it. The Franciscan charisma has deeply enriched Christian Spirituality with a multifaceted ecological dimension. In this edition of the journal, Luiz Carlos Susin, like Cardinal Hummes, a Franciscan himself, exalts the formidable contribution of the Saint from Assisi while

demonstrating that Francis' promotion of a more fraternal relationship between humans and all creatures, whereby animals played a special role, was not primarily motivated by the urge to recuperate a lost Paradise, but rather the consequence of a radically kenotic attitude of disappropriation and willingness to serve a new and most radical form of fraternity, an ideal based more on equality than on any form of hierarchy.

Of course, the challenges delineated by Ottmar Edenhofer continue to demand a response. But such response must be one in which the interconnectedness of the economic, political, environmental and cultural dimensions of the crisis are foregrounded, and in which the perspective of vulnerable individuals and communities is central. After all, an ethical response not only requires that one attends to the human suffering that results directly *and* indirectly from the environmental destruction, but also insists that any attempts to address the crisis must not do so at the expense of the vulnerable.

These challenges are very much to the fore in Part 3 of the volume, focused on environmental challenges and theo-ethical responses. Roberto Tomichá writes from Bolivia, highlighting how the indigenous world-view of the Amerindians can assist communities in addressing the environmental destruction that is very much in view. Mathew invokes the indigenous knowledge of fishing communities along the southern Indian coast, which is also replete with ecological wisdom, and argues that this too can be deployed to mitigate the current environmental challenges, especially in their impact on the ocean and its habitats. From Nairobi, Kenya, Wilfred Sumani issues a stark warning about the serious impact that climate change is already having on the livelihoods of people in the global South. Sumani highlights the political and governance-related challenges that make mitigation and response difficult. Notwithstanding the challenges however, he proposes two-tiered approach to climate change: in the short term, access to technological solutions to deal with immediate threats, and in the long term the restoration of creation to its original state.

Theological reflection on ecology is supplemented around the world by significant environmental praxis. In the final section, we highlight some of the inspirational advocacy and activism from around the world. Thus, Cardinal Hummes of Brazil speaks about his work to protect Amazonia and its peoples from the relentless assault on one of the world's most

important ecosystems. Edward Osang Obi, Director of Centre for Social and Corporate Responsibility in Port Harcourt describes the church's activism in support of social justice and corporate responsibility in relation to the mining and resource extraction industries in Nigeria. In addition to advocacy and activism, education for ecological responsibility is key and Isis Ibrahim and Juan Pablo Espinosa each analyse educational programs with which they have been involved that seek to do precisely this. Ibrahim's contribution describes the learnings gained from the Misseo Achen supported multi-cultural and multi-religious programme that was supported by *Misseo* (Achen), while Juan Pablo Espinosa's contribution describes a Chilean programme focused on youth.

Our final contribution in this section comes from a person deeply engaged in agriculture and seriously concerned with the contradictions and paradoxes of contemporary agro-business. Felix of Löwenstein is a careful reader of Pope Francis' Encyclical and so goes to the core of the problem when he states that the problem constituted by the growing deterioration of our *common home* is not just personal greed and lack of responsibility, but a world structure that continues to ensure that *those have the best chances in global economy who succeed best to load costs of production to environment, namely, the poor*. In question, therefore, in the case of agriculture, a fundamental dimension of our survival and life on earth, are the very opportunities or chances available to the future generations in terms of guaranteeing the «daily bread» of which we pray in the Our Father. Felix Löwenstein, therefore, urges us all, including decision-makers, to use the practical experience of farmers as corroborated by newly acquired scientific conquests to promote around the world sustainable and ecologically sound processes required by the production of the food that keeps us alive and of which no human generation in the future will be able to dispense.

Our issue ends with a Theological Forum that reports on the *Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church* conference in Sarajevo in July 2018. The gathering of almost 500 Catholic ethicists from around the world, focused on bridge building for the future, and foregrounded ethical responses to the ecological crisis in its reflections.