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**THE COMMON GOOD IN THE VISION OF JOHN PAUL II AND
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THE COMMON GOOD IN THE VISION OF JOHN PAUL II AND FRANCIS: FROM
SOLIDARITY TO CARE FOR CREATION

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ABSTRACT

THE COMMON GOOD IN THE VISION OF JOHN PAUL II AND FRANCIS: FROM SOLIDARITY TO CARE FOR CREATION

Martial Tatchim Fotso

This thesis focuses on the evolution of the understanding of the common good in Catholic Social Teaching (CST) from John Paul II to Francis. I demonstrate that while the vision of John Paul II on the common good stressed the principle of solidarity for the good of all people and each individual, Francis made a significant change by expanding the concept of common good beyond the human good to an integral ecology.

The principles of common good and solidarity are essentially related in the social vision of John Paul II. Solidarity is “a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because we are responsible for all.”¹ In other words, for John Paul II, solidarity entails a person’s commitment to the well-being of others and to building up the common good. Among the different principles of CST, John Paul II considers solidarity as essential for achieving the common good or integral human development at every level of society. On the other side, Francis expands the meaning of the common good primarily with a concern of the creation in CST. While John Paul II observes that peoples and nations are increasingly interconnected and interdependent around the world, Francis stresses that “everything is interconnected.”² Francis’ expansion of John Paul II’s understanding of the common good, rooted in integral ecology, is an ecclesial response to environmental degradation which

¹ John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, n. 38.

² Francis, *Laudato Si*, 70.

constitutes a threat both for the earth and for humanity. In particular, the poorest are the most affected.

Ultimately, a practical case illustrates the relevance of the expansion of the common good in CST by Pope Francis in the life of poor rural communities affected by deforestation in Cameroon. I argue that the promotion of the common good in Cameroon requires our commitment to work assiduously to protect the Basin Congo Forest.

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

This thesis will focus on the evolution of the understanding of the common good in Catholic Social Teaching from Pope John Paul II to Pope Francis. I will demonstrate that while the vision of John Paul II on the common good stressed the principle of solidarity for the good of all people and each individual, Francis made a significant change by expanding the concept of common good beyond the human good to an integral ecology. In other words, for Francis, building the common good involves care for creation that embraces human and non-human creatures.

The thesis will be divided into three chapters. The first will show how the principle of common good and solidarity are essentially related in the social vision of John Paul II. Put simply, the achievement of the common good at the national and international level requires solidarity among people.

The key purpose of the second chapter will be to demonstrate how Francis expands the meaning of the common good primarily with a concern of the creation in Catholic social teaching. For Francis, integral and sustainable human development involves care for creation embracing human and non-human creatures. Francis shows how this principle of the common good must imperatively be taken into account in the urgent care for the earth, our common home, in an integral ecology approach.¹ More concretely, I will show that Francis' expansion of John Paul II's understanding of the common good, rooted in integral ecology, is an ecclesial response to environmental degradation which constitutes a threat

¹ Vincent J. Miller, "Integral ecology: Francis's spiritual and Moral vision of interconnectedness," in *The Theological and Ecological Vision of Laudato si'*, ed. Vincent J. Miller (Bloomsbury, 2017): 11-12.

both for the earth and for humanity. In particular, the poorest are the most affected. This situation requires an ecological conversion.

The last chapter will illustrate, in a practical case, the relevance of the expansion of the principle of the common good in Catholic social teaching by Pope Francis in the life of poor rural communities affected by deforestation in Cameroon. I argue that the promotion of the common good in Cameroon requires our commitment to work assiduously to protect the Basin Congo Forest. In other words, I will show that the solidarity – as part of our commitment for the common good – with the rural poor most affected by the environmental degradation in Cameroon, requires our engagement to protect forests: care for creation.

Chapter 1: The Common Good in the Vision of John Paul II: Ethics of Solidarity

Introduction

The main goal of this first chapter is to show how the concept of common good and solidarity are essentially related in the social vision of John Paul II. Put simply, the achievement of the common good at the national and international level requires solidarity among people. More concretely, in this first chapter, I propose to do the following: First, present an overview of the concept of the common good as it is understood in the context of Catholic social thought leading up to John Paul II pontificate. Second, present the understanding of the common good in the writings of John Paul II. Third, define solidarity and indicate its role in the seeking for the common good in John Paul II's thought; then show how solidarity integrates other principles of Catholic social teaching (CST): human dignity, participation, and the universal destination of the goods, in order to frame the common good. Fourth, indicate how international solidarity is crucial to promote and preserve peace as part of the common good.

Overview of the Notion of Common Good in Pre-John Paul II's CST

Before focusing on the contribution of John Paul II in the understanding of the common good, in this first section, I will give the definition of the common good as it was articulated at the Second Vatican Council and how some scholars have explained and developed this principle.

The common good is one of the most important and distinctive concepts of Catholic Social Teaching. The concept was used before Vatican II by popes Leo XIII and Pius XI but without explaining it. Anna Rowlands observes, "Whilst the two earliest modern social

encyclicals – *Rerum novarum* and *Quadragesimo anno* – presented the common good as a foundational principle of the Church social teaching, curiously they offered no real explanation of what they assumed this term to mean.”² The classic definition of the common good stems from the second Vatican Council’s pastoral constitution *Gaudium et Spes*. The Fathers of the Council defined it as the “sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily.”³ This definition⁴ certainly frames a concept of what constitutes the common good. However, it may prove difficult to interpret since one could ask what ‘fulfillment’ means. Vogt clarified this concept as, “Humans need access to many things in order to survive and to realize their full potential. A good society facilitates universal access to all of those goods—known collectively as the common good.”⁵

The “conditions of social life” to which the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council refer, include both individual goods that every human person needs such as water, food, shelter, clothing; but also, communal goods, that is goods shared by others such as climate, forest, and air.⁶ The political philosopher, Patrick Riordan, SJ, goes further by describing these conditions of social life. For him, these conditions also include governmental structures (local, national, international), institutions of property, markets, the financial system, the organization of businesses... They can belong to what he calls our “common

² Anna Rowlands, *Towards a Politics of Communion: Catholic Social Teaching in Dark Times*, (New York: T&T Clark, 2021), 152.

³ Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 26

⁴ Note that this definition of the common good by the Second Vatican Concile is a reformulation of the definition given by John XXIII in his encyclical *Mater et Magistra*, 65.

⁵ Christopher Vogt, "Catholic Social Teaching and Creation," from *Green Discipleship*, ed. Tobias Winright (Anselm, 2011): 225.

⁶ Daniel P. Scheid, *The Cosmic Common Good: Religious Grounds for Ecological Ethics*, (New York: Oxford University, 2016), 17.

goods.” If all these institutions work well, they achieve human flourishing as a goal of the common good which is an aspirational vision.⁷

Note that the search for the common good stresses the realization at the same time of the flourishing of every human being and the community to which s/he belongs as its goal. The fulfillment of the individual is not prioritized to the detriment of that of the group, and inversely, the fulfillment of the group should not be privileged to the detriment of that of the individual.

In Catholic social teaching the principle of the common good is rooted on the assumption that human beings have an essentially social nature.⁸ They are called to live with others in community. Each person shares with others a certain number of basic goods necessary for the fulfillment of each and every one. No one can be happy in isolation from others. The fulfillment of each human person cannot be achieved without the participation of other people; and individual happiness cannot be privileged over the common good.⁹ Rowlands, rightly notes, “[The principle of the common good] is a simple reminder that human beings are intrinsically social and interdependent creatures and cannot achieve their good alone.”¹⁰

Theologian David Hollenbach, SJ, explicated and deepened the understanding of the common good with attention to a parallel between the communal dimension of the common good and the public goods in economic theory. He wrote, “‘public goods’ is

⁷ Notre Dame Newman Centre for Faith and Reason, “Housing Public Policy and the Common good,” Youtube video, 1:06, June 29, 2022, <https://newman.nd.edu/events/2022/06/29/housing-public-policy-and-the-common-good/>

⁸ Todd David Whitmore, “Catholic Social Teaching: Starting with the Common Good,” in Weigert and Kelley, eds., *Living the Catholic Social Tradition* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2005): 59.

⁹ Scheid, *The Cosmic Common Good: Religious Grounds for Ecological Ethics*, 18.

¹⁰ Rowlands, *Towards a Politics of Communion: Catholic Social Teaching in Dark Times*, 153.

perhaps the closest contemporary analogue to the idea of the common good ... A public good can be described as a good that is present for all members of a relevant community if it is there for any of them.”¹¹ The common good includes not only individual goods (food, clothing, shelter) but also goods that exist only when they subsist in common: non-rivalrous and non-excludable goods such as education, transportation, freedom of speech.¹²

For Hollenbach, the common good also includes “the personal dimensions of relationship, affection, and even love that binds societies together.”¹³ Put simply, love and friendship are also part of the common good. During the Covid-19 pandemic, experience showed that people grieved not only because of the loss of their job but also the loss of a friend or partner. Grief is generally considered as “the natural reaction to loss.”¹⁴ Even though in contemporary western society some people tend to deny grieving as part of the human experience, the point is that no one can escape this reality.¹⁵ Human beings are essentially relational. They develop bonds of friendship and love which are elements of the common good as Hollenbach reminds us. So, the common good includes both material and immaterial goods.

However, there is no agreement among scholars about the specific context of the common good. This principle also constitutes a practical tool and an ethical criterion in public life. Mathias Nebel asserts, “[The common good] is an ethical principle, a principle that governs public action and remains implicit in all action undertaken in the public

¹¹ Hollenbach, *The Common Good and Christian Ethics*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 8.

¹² Hollenbach, *The Common Good and Christian Ethics*, 8.

¹³ Scheid, *The Cosmic Common Good: Religious Grounds for Ecological Ethics*, 17.

¹⁴ Jackson Rainer, *Life After Loss: Contemporary Grief Counseling and Therapy*, (Wisconsin: PESI Publishing and Media, 2013), 3.

¹⁵ Rainer, *Life After Loss: Contemporary Grief Counseling and Therapy*, 4-5.

realm.”¹⁶ Although, people do not have agreement on how the good life looks, the aspiration to the common good is inherent in all forms of community or social life and derives from the relational character of human beings.¹⁷ Nebel makes explicit the practical dimension of the search for common good when writing, “Wherever there is a community, the question of the common good arises. What are our common needs? What goods do we need? What shared benefits may we get by seeking together a specific goal? The question of the common good is specific, it is pragmatic.”¹⁸

Although the liberalism tradition tends to consider the principle of common good as obsolete and superfluous - people do not agree, even among Christians, about the conception of the good -, in Catholic social thought this principle is still relevant today.¹⁹ Indeed, the common good is the instrument par excellence for assessing the quality of effective governance of nations. “The World Bank, confronted with governments’ mismanagement, attempts to define governance as the exercise of political power for the common good.”²⁰ Nebel affirms this when he writes, “the question of good governance is closely connected with that of the common good.”²¹

¹⁶ Mathias Nebel, “Searching for the Common Good,” in *Searching for the Common Good: Philosophical, Theological and Economic Approaches*, edited by Mathias Nebel and Thierry Colland (Baden-Baden: 2018):

126.

¹⁷ Notre Dame Newman Centre for Faith and Reason, “Housing Public Policy and the Common good,” Youtube video, 1:06, June 29, 2022, <https://newman.nd.edu/events/2022/06/29/housing-public-policy-and-the-common-good/>

¹⁸ Nebel, “Searching for the Common Good,” 128-129.

¹⁹ CAPP-USA, “Recovering the Common goods with Fr Patrick Riordan,” Youtube video, 1:00, May 27, 2022, <https://www.google.com/url?>

²⁰ Nebel, “Searching for the Common Good,” 113.

²¹ Mathias Nebel, “A Theological Conclusion,” in *Searching for the Common Good: Philosophical, Theological and Economic Approaches*, edited by Mathias Nebel and Thierry Colland (Baden-Baden: 2018): 226.

In societies, “The common good helps identify empirical facts of socioeconomic exclusion.”²² The common good should not exclude any individual or group of persons from a fair share of the goods for the sake of which they cooperate.²³ More concretely, the main questions here are: who counts? Who benefits? Who is excluded? For instance, the current health crisis reveals social inequities across the world. In the United States, Covid-19 has caused a disproportionate number of deaths among people of color, with heaviest losses among Black and Indigenous Americans.²⁴ This is directly related to the socioeconomic exclusion which these communities suffer. In the United States, to receive health care in a hospital one must have health insurance. Yet, many people of color do not have health insurance because they do not have a job that provides health insurance.²⁵ Additionally, people in these communities often live in places where health-care facilities are not near them, and they do not have adequate transportation to access these services. This regrettable situation provides a concrete example of the need to work for the common good, to effect a more humane society in which the acknowledgement of the dignity of each human person²⁶ leads us to an effective solidarity with the most vulnerable. In fact, “Our full humanity [...] cannot be realized in isolation or at the expense of other people’s fulfillment.”²⁷

²² Jacquineau Azetsop, “The Return to the Common as a challenge to the ‘Eclipse of the Public’: Five Usages of the Common Good,” in *Public Theology and the Global Common Good: The Contribution of David Hollenbach, SJ*, edited by Kevin Ahern, Meghan J. Clark, Kristin E. Heyer, and Laurie Johnson (New York: Orbis, 2016): 111.

²³ D’Arcy Lectures, “Philosophical and theological sources of the Common good” Youtube video, 1:00, April 30, 2021, <https://www.google.com/url?>

²⁴ APM Research Lab, “The color of coronavirus: Covid-19 deaths by race and ethnicity in the U.S.” (2020)

²⁵ The CDC, “Health Equity Considerations and Racial and Ethnic Minority Groups,” n.p.

²⁶ Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, 8.

²⁷ Kelly Johnson, “Pandemic and the Common Good,” *Catholic Moral Theology*, (March 2020).

Understanding of the Common Good in the Writings of John Paul II

In this second section, I will focus on how the concept of the common good is explored in the teaching of John Paul II. Without denying his other writings, a particular attention will be given to *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*.

Pope John Paul II frequently used the phrase “common good” in his social encyclicals: 9 times in *Laborem Exercem* (LE), 12 times in *Sollicitudo rei socialis* (SRS) and 14 times in *Centesimus annus* (CA). He inherits a view of the common good from Vatican II and Paul VI. Referring to the notion of common good in LE, John Paul II did not define the concept. It seems as if he assumes that the reader already knew its meaning. Note that John Paul II, was one of the fathers of the Second Vatican Council that defined the principle of the common good, mentioned earlier. However, even if he did not define the notion of common good in LE, John Paul II points out its relationship with human work. For John Paul II, human work is a means to grow the common good.²⁸ Indeed, work is the activity in which a human person creates goods and services which are intended for the fulfillment of all the members of his/her society. In addition, work contributes to the fulfillment of people in the sense that they feel valued in the community,²⁹ but also because they can meet the needs of their family through their wages. This is the reason why John Paul II insists on the just remuneration of the worker.³⁰ A worker needs to take care of his/her family.

In addition, John Paul II argues that businesses must also work to achieve the common good. He wants to clarify that a company does not have as its sole purpose the

²⁸ John Paul II, *Laborem Exercem*, n. 10, 23.

²⁹ John Paul II, *Laborem Exercem*, n. 9.

³⁰ John Paul II, *Laborem Exercem*, n. 19.

pursuit of profit. It has also a social responsibility which is the protection of the rights of its employees and the protection of the environment. However, while John Paul II is in favor of the trade unions' right to strike, as a means of expression to claim their rights when these are violated, he specifies that the strike must be carried out with concern for the common good of the whole of society, which is opposed to the paralysis of socio-economic life.³¹

In SRS, John Paul II gave a basic definition of the common good. For him, the common good refers to “the good of all and of each individual.”³² This means the realization of the common good is concerned with the well-being of both each of us and the whole society.³³ One should not be sacrificed to the benefit of the other. Daniel Scheid goes further in that direction, when he notes, “Theologically, the common good signifies that God seeks the well-being of the whole in addition to the well-being of each person, and not just because a healthy community can better enable persons to achieve their own personal good.”³⁴ The well-being or the good of the whole is more than the sum of the good of each part. But the good of the whole as whole. In the same direction, John Paul II made a critical nuance about the common good in CA. He writes, “[The common good] is not simply the sum total of particular interests; rather it involves an assessment and integration of those interests on the basis of a balanced hierarchy of values.”³⁵ In fact, to consider particular interests in an isolated and independent way would be to compromise the unity

³¹ John Paul II, *Laborem Exercem*, n. 23.

³² John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, n. 38.

³³ Rowlands, *Towards a Politics of Communion: Catholic Social Teaching in Dark Times*, 257.

³⁴ Scheid, *The Cosmic Common Good: Religious Grounds for Ecological Ethics*, 18.

³⁵ John Paul II, *Centesimus annus*, n. 47

desired by the Creator (Jn 17:21). Particular interests must converge towards the fulfillment of the whole as a whole, with respect for the dignity of each person.

John Paul II rejects any conception of the common good that opposes the rights of individuals to economic initiative. For him, the common good cannot be considered in opposition to the individual good.³⁶ In this perspective, a state cannot choose to monopolize all the means of production for the sake of the common good. In fact, “The common good affirms the presence of a good that transcends yet also includes the well-being of the individual part.”³⁷

In Catholic social teaching, the principle of the common good implies that we are not only responsible for our own lives.³⁸ Indeed, every life matters in front of God’s eyes. While recognizing that everyone has something to contribute to the common good as a duty in community,³⁹ John Paul II thought that the state has an important role to play in order to protect the common good.⁴⁰ Political decisions must always be made in order to achieve the common good.⁴¹ Although each person is responsible for attaining the common good, the State has a pivotal role to play in achieving this goal. Indeed, political authority exists to ensure the well-being of populations without exception.⁴²

All leadership – especially political leadership – must tend towards the realization of the common good.⁴³ Meghan Clark goes in the same direction when she writes, “For

³⁶ John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, n. 15.

³⁷ Scheid, *The Cosmic Common Good: Religious Grounds for Ecological Ethics*, 18.

³⁸ John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, n. 38.

³⁹ Scheid, *The Cosmic Common Good: Religious Grounds for Ecological Ethics*, 18.

⁴⁰ John Paul II, *Centisimus annus* n. 11; John Paul II, *Laborem Exercem*, n. 20.

⁴¹ John Paul II, *Centisimus annus*, n. 47.

⁴² Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 168.

⁴³ John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, n. 23.

Catholicism, politics and government play important, positive roles in working for the common good.”⁴⁴ Note that politically, the affirmation of St Paul that all authority comes from God, has unfortunately often been misinterpreted by some African heads of state to justify their longevity in power and to impose their governance: “Let every person be subordinate to the higher authorities, for there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been established by God.” (Rm 13: 1). Yet, Paul did not just talk about obedience to the authorities, he also indicated the mission or the vocation of authority as “a servant of God for [our] good” (Rm 13:4). In other words, from the Pauline perspective, a political authority that does not work for the promotion of the common good would thereby lose its legitimacy. The right exercise of political power aims to achieve the common good. John Paul II expressed that truth in this way: “The leadership role among nations can only be justified by the possibility and willingness to contribute widely and generously to the common good.”⁴⁵

Furthermore, in SRS, John Paul II highlights the relationship between the common good and the concept of integral human development (IHD) which is a concept of Catholic social teaching (CST) that describe the goal of developing the whole person (body, mind, spirit), and every person (no one should be excluded).⁴⁶ For John Paul II, the realization of the common good in a society necessarily includes the promotion of integral human development. Meghan Clark adds, “In CST, the theological starting point for IHD is the

⁴⁴ Clark, Meghan J. “Good Politics: As We Approach This Year’s Election, Catholic Social Teaching Asks Us to Reflect on What It Means to Be a People.” U.S. Catholic 87, no. 10 (October 2022): 40-41.

⁴⁵ John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, n. 23.

⁴⁶ Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, n. 14.

theological anthropology of dignity that is the unique connection between God and Humanity.”⁴⁷

John Paul II establishes a connection between these two concepts: common good and integral human development. The concept of integral human development here builds upon his predecessor Paul VI.⁴⁸ John Paul II writes, “in a different world, ruled by concern for the common good of all humanity, or by concern for the ‘spiritual and human development of all’ instead of by the quest for individual profit, peace would be possible as the result of a ‘more perfect justice among people.’”⁴⁹ So, the common good does not only emphasize the goodness of the whole as a whole but also includes the full social, intellectual, and spiritual flourishing of every human being.⁵⁰ Charles Curran, Kenneth Himes and Thomas Shannon, in their commentary on SRS recognize the connection between common good and Integral Human development in John Paul II’s thought. The experts write, “People are called to work for the common good or the full human development of the whole individual and of all women and men.”⁵¹ This insight of John Paul II helps us understand that the principle of the common good deals with the community as whole, but also the individual as whole. That is all dimensions (spiritual, intellectual, biological, social, political) of the human person need to be take into consideration for his/her fulfillment.

⁴⁷ Meghan Clark, “Development as Freedom Together: Human Dignity & Human Rights in CST and CA,” in *Promoting Integral Human Development: Catholic Social Teaching and the Capability Approach*, edited by Séverine Deneulin and Clemens Sedmak, (Forthcoming): 6.

⁴⁸ Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, n. 42.

⁴⁹ John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, 10.

⁵⁰ Scheid, *The Cosmic Common Good: Religious Grounds for Ecological Ethics*, 17-18.

⁵¹ Charles E. Curran, Kenneth R. Himes, Thomas A. Shannon, “Commentary on *Sollicitudo rei socialis* (On Social Concern),” in *Modern Catholic Teaching: Commentaries and Interpretations*, edited by Kenneth R. Himes, (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2018): 441.

Among the different principles of Catholic Social Teaching, John Paul II considers solidarity as essential for achieving the common good or integral human development at every level of society: national, regional, and international. Schematically speaking, if the common good can be considered as a destination, solidarity is the best way to achieve it or at least to get closer to it.

Common Good and Solidarity in John Paul II's CST

In this section, I will define solidarity and then show how this concept is linked with the common good in John Paul II's thought. Next, I will explain how solidarity promotes authentic development.

Solidarity as a Way to Achieve the Common Good

The principle of solidarity was well developed in Catholic social teaching by John Paul II in his encyclical letters. Beyer maintains that John Paul II is the one “who most fully developed Catholic Social Teaching’s ethic of solidarity.”⁵² Whitmore made the same observation when he writes, “John Paul II is the pope who develops the idea of solidarity most fully.”⁵³ Even if the concept of solidarity was already used by some of his predecessors such as Pius XII and John XXIII, Rowlands notes: “If the principle and virtue of solidarity is identified with a single papacy it is surely that of John Paul II.”⁵⁴

John Paul II defined solidarity as, “a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because

⁵² Gerald J. Beyer, “The Meaning of Solidarity in Catholic Social Teaching,” in *Political theology*, Vol. 15 No. 1, (2014): 8.

⁵³ Whitmore, “CST: Starting with the Common Good,” 64.

⁵⁴ Rowlands, *Towards a Politics of Communion: Catholic Social Teaching in Dark Times*, 240.

we are responsible for all.”⁵⁵ In other words, for him, solidarity entails a person’s commitment to the well-being of others and to building up the common good. Since we are interconnected, acting without solidarity could affect the well-being of other people and prevent them from reaching their fulfillment. Scheid goes in the same direction as John Paul II, establishing the link between solidarity and the common good. He rightly observes, “Solidarity is actually a vital corollary to the common good because it actively supports and promotes people to work for the common good, while also affirming the essential dignity of each individual person.”⁵⁶ Solidarity recalls us that we are one human family and, in this family, the life of each member matters. Solidarity is not possible without the conviction that every human being has the same dignity, because we are all creatures of God. Taking that into consideration, we cannot be indifferent to the suffering of people who are most vulnerable. Solidarity entails social charity for the well-being of all members of our society.

In the social vision of John Paul II, “The principles of the common good and solidarity both highlight the conception that human persons are essentially social by nature.”⁵⁷ Solidarity promotes the moral vision of the common good in the sense that people need to see themselves as part of society and to help their neighbors who are marginalized.

Solidarity leads persons to feel the suffering experienced by others and to come to their help through acts of charity. Vogt writes, “[solidarity leads] people to be attentive to

⁵⁵ John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, n. 38.

⁵⁶ Scheid, *The Cosmic Common Good: Religious Grounds for Ecological Ethics*, 87.

⁵⁷ Scheid, *The Cosmic Common Good: Religious Grounds for Ecological Ethics*, 83.

the suffering of others and to regard that suffering as morally relevant to their own lives.”⁵⁸ However, not all forms of help can be considered as solidarity as understood in Catholic social thought. “Meghan Clark acknowledges that not all acts of aid to others are necessarily acts of solidarity. To habituate an agent in the virtue of solidarity, an act must be done with the intention of promoting the other’s participation in the common good.”⁵⁹ In other words, solidarity must not create a form of dependence between the benefactor and the recipient of aid. Solidarity must allow the latter to participate effectively in the seeking of the common good. Note that there is a reciprocity between the concepts of solidarity and the common good: while solidarity is a means by which the common good is realized in a society, the common good constitutes the criterion to assess an authentic solidarity.

Solidarity is not “a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far.”⁶⁰ Even if solidarity can include an emotional dimension, it is more than that. Solidarity leads to action for the common good. Thomas Massaro recognizes this truth. He asserts, “Solidarity begins as an inner attitude and, when it has fully taken root within a person, expresses itself through numerous external activities that demonstrate a person’s commitment to the well-being of others.”⁶¹

In SRS, the pope observes that human beings are increasingly interconnected and interdependent around the world. In fact, “Today perhaps more than in the past, people are

⁵⁸ Christopher P. Vogt, "Fostering a Catholic commitment to the common good: an approach rooted in virtue ethics," *Theological Studies* 68, no. 2 (2007): 400.

⁵⁹ Scheid, *The Cosmic Common Good: Religious Grounds for Ecological Ethics*, 87. See Meghan J. Clark, "Anatomy of a Social Virtue," in *Political Theology*, 15, n.1 (2014), 26-39.

⁶⁰ John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, 38.

⁶¹ Thomas Massaro, *Living Justice: Catholic Social Teaching in Action*, (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2012), 85.

realizing that they are linked together by a common destiny, which is to be constructed together, if catastrophe for all is to be avoided.”⁶² For John Paul II, interdependence can be defined as “a system determining relationships in the contemporary world, in its economic, cultural, political and religious elements, and accepted as a moral category.”⁶³ Similarly, Desmond Tutu observes, “We are human because we belong. We are made for community, for togetherness, for family, to exist in a delicate network of interdependence.”⁶⁴ Vogt made the same observation, “In a globalized world, human beings are unavoidably in relationship with one another.”⁶⁵ And then, he adds, “[Solidarity] calls for an intellectual recognition that interdependence is a necessary quality of human existence.”⁶⁶ That is solidarity has not only an emotional and practical dimension, but also a rational dimension. However, the question is whether interdependence will be disastrous for humanity or marked by solidarity among people or communities. According to John Paul II, “When this interdependence is separated from its ethical requirements, it has disastrous consequences for the weakest.”⁶⁷ Referring on the social vision of John Paul II in relation with solidarity, Vogt writes, “Solidarity demands that the structures of society be reformed in such a way that this situation of interdependence is transformed into a morally positive relationship that respects the human dignity of all.”⁶⁸

⁶² John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 26.

⁶³ John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, 38.

⁶⁴ Desmond Tutu, “No future without forgiveness” quoted by Christophère Ngolele, “African Wisdom in Dialogue with *Laudato si'*: An Environmental Ethics Based on the Paradigm of Recognition and Sacred Care,” *Journal of Catholic Social Thought*, 16, n. 1 (2019): 8.

⁶⁵ Vogt, “Fostering a Catholic commitment to the common good,” 403.

⁶⁶ Vogt, “Fostering a Catholic commitment to the common good,” 403.

⁶⁷ John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, 17.

⁶⁸ Vogt, “Fostering a Catholic commitment to the common good,” 403.

In sum, let us acknowledge that “solidarity inclines people to act for the common good.”⁶⁹ However, to deeply understand the crucial place of solidarity in achieving the common good or integral human development, it is important to situate the context in which this ethical principle emerges in the social thought of John Paul II, particularly in *Sollicitudo rei socialis* where the word solidarity appears twenty-eight times.⁷⁰

Solidarity as Response to the Failure of a Model of Development

The realization of integral human development in any society requires an equitable distribution of the goods of the earth, which is not possible without the establishment of true solidarity.⁷¹ Indeed, John Paul II in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* prolongs and revitalizes the cry already launched by Paul VI in favor of the poor in *Populorum progressio*. Paul VI observed, “The hungry nations of the world cry out to the peoples blessed with abundance. And the Church, cut to the quick by this cry, asks each and every man to hear his brother's plea and answer it lovingly.”⁷² In the same direction, John Paul II says, “the multitudes of human beings who lack the goods and services offered by development are much more numerous than those who possess them.”⁷³ This situation of injustice was already pointed out by Vatican II in its pastoral constitution *Gaudium et Spes*. The Fathers observed,

While an immense number of people still lack the absolute necessities of life, some, even in less advanced areas, live in luxury or squander wealth. Extravagance and wretchedness exist side by side. While a few enjoy very great power of choice, the majority are deprived of almost all possibility of acting on their own initiative and responsibility, and often subsist in living and working conditions unworthy of the human person.⁷⁴

⁶⁹ Scheid, *The Cosmic Common Good: Religious Grounds for Ecological Ethics*, 87.

⁷⁰ Uzochukwu Jude Njoku, “Re-thinking Solidarity as a principle of Catholic Social Teaching going beyond *Gaudium et Spes* and the Social encyclicals of John Paul II,” in *Political Theology*, (2008): 531.

⁷¹ Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, n. 22, 43.

⁷² Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, n. 3.

⁷³ John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis* n. 9.

⁷⁴ Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 9.

According to John Paul II, the inequitable distribution of the goods of the earth is simply the consequence of a wrong conception of development or the failure of a development model. For him, development must essentially lead to the fulfillment of all members of the community. “True development cannot consist in the simple accumulation of wealth and in the greater availability of goods and services, if this is gained at the expense of the development of the masses.”⁷⁵ As noted earlier, for John Paul II, the search for the common good is necessarily rooted in the achievement of integral human development.⁷⁶

Let us recall that in the years from 1950 into the 1960s, and even beyond, development was generally perceived solely as economic growth.⁷⁷ Yet Paul VI noted, “The development ... cannot be restricted to economic growth alone. To be authentic, it must be well rounded; it must foster the development of each man and of the whole man.”⁷⁸ Séverine Deneulin rightly points out that in CST, the concept of integral human development appeared primarily as a critique of the reduction of development to economic growth.⁷⁹ Some development economists such as Michael Todaro and Amartya Sen have shown that the notion of development must be approached holistically and not from a purely economic perspective. “For Sen, development or progress is about human flourishing and the expansion of human freedoms such as people’s ability to be healthy, or to participate in decisions that affect them, among other things.”⁸⁰ Sen’s vision of

⁷⁵ John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis* n. 9.

⁷⁶ John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis* n. 38.

⁷⁷ Michael P. Todaro, *Economic Development in the Third World*, (New York & London: Longman, 1985), 62.

⁷⁸ Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, n. 14.

⁷⁹ Séverine Deneulin, “Religion and development: integral ecology and the Catholic Church Amazon Synod,” *Third World Quarterly* 42, n. 10 (2021): 2284.

⁸⁰ Deneulin, “Religion and development,” 2285.

development is close to that proposed in the social vision of John Paul II and Paul VI. In fact, the human person is both a relational being (called to live with others), and multidimensional (body, mind and spirit). One cannot flourish if others live in misery. Hence the invitation to achieve the “duty of solidarity.” For Paul VI, authentic development, “cannot be restricted to economic growth alone. To be authentic, it must be well rounded; it must foster the development of each man and of the whole man.”⁸¹ Authentic development leads to the full human flourishing of all without exception. That is if “the fruits of human civilization are unequally distributed and some people are deprived of a fuller participation in these goods,”⁸² we are far from authentic human development.

Charles Clark and Helen Alford, OP, maintain that development implies a transcendental dimension.⁸³ Indeed, wealth does not always lead to happiness. “In fact, there is a better understanding today that the mere accumulation of goods and services, even for the benefit of the majority, is not enough for the realization of human happiness.”⁸⁴ To be happy, one needs to understand first the meaning of life.⁸⁵ Of course, human development entails prosperity. However, in speaking of prosperity, the economist and theologian, Albino Barrera, O.P., precedes this word with the qualifier ‘true’: ‘true prosperity,’⁸⁶ which suggests that there is ‘false prosperity’. In fact, prosperity is more than the accumulation of goods or wealth. True prosperity leads to the full human flourishing

⁸¹ Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, n. 14.

⁸² Njoku, “Re-thinking Solidarity as a Principle of Catholic Social Teaching,” 530.

⁸³ Charles M.A. Clark & Helen Alford, *Rich and Poor: Rebalancing the Economy*, (CTS Publications, 2010), 51.

⁸⁴ John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, n. 28

⁸⁵ Clark & Alford, *Rich and Poor: Rebalancing the Economy*, 53.

⁸⁶ Albino Barrera, “What Does Catholic Social Thought Recommend for the Economy?” from *The True Wealth of Nations*, ed. Daniel K. Finn (Oxford, 2010): 20.

of all without exception. So, “material sufficiency [even if necessary] is not the ultimate end. It is simply a means to the more important goal of [Happiness].”⁸⁷ People cannot actually be happy when many people around them live in poverty. “Unfortunately, instead of becoming fewer the poor are becoming more numerous, not only in less developed countries but-and this seems no less scandalous-in the more developed ones too.”⁸⁸

Development requires the removal of poverty⁸⁹ through an effective solidarity. However, since “Poverty is an equivocal term”⁹⁰ it is important to clarify this concept. In Christian language, there is sometimes ambiguity in the way that we use the term poverty. For instance, in Luke’s Gospel Jesus presents the beatitudes speaking simply about the poor (5:20); in Matthew’s Gospel Jesus emphasizes the poor in spirit: “Blessed are the poor in spirit” (Matt 5:1). When John Paul II talks about poverty in SRS, he means also material poverty. That is people affected by real poverty. As John Chrysostom (347-407), a Church Father, reminds us, “In the first-place poverty is truly a dreadful thing, as everyone knows who has experienced it.”⁹¹ One of the most visible manifestations of poverty is food insecurity which is “a lack of consistent access to enough food for every person in a household to live an active, healthy life.”⁹² It refers to hunger (not as a physical sensation of discomfort after skipping a meal) but as a real problem. Food insecurity is one way that one can measure how many people cannot afford food.

⁸⁷ Barrera, “What Does Catholic Social Thought Recommend,” 19.

⁸⁸ John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, 42

⁸⁹ Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom*, (New York: Anchor Books, 1999), 21.

⁹⁰ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, (New York: Orbis Books, 1988), 163.

⁹¹ St John Chrysostom, *On Wealth and Poverty*, edited by Bogdan Bucur and translated by Catherine P. Roth. (New York: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2020), 29.

⁹² Feeding America, *Hunger and Food insecurity*.

The poor are those who are unable to feed themselves. Food is among the most basic of human needs. Experiencing hunger is very painful for the poor, more than anything else. That is why every nation, every community should try to fight poverty by promoting development actions. Even if poverty cannot be limited to its economic or material dimension, it should be noted that “The term poverty designates in the first-place material poverty, that is the lack of economic goods necessary for a human life worthy of the name.”⁹³ Taken in this sense, poverty is something degrading and humiliating. It is a state of life that no human being should suffer. Gutiérrez, a Peruvian theologian, says, “What we mean by material poverty is a subhuman situation...Concretely, to be poor means to die of hunger.”⁹⁴ So, poverty is an evil: an inhuman situation that must change by promoting development. Development involves improving the living conditions for everyone through solidarity. In other words, when we talk about development, it is about development for all.

The liberal economy promoted by Adam Smith and its neoliberal successors have failed to achieve development for all. “In 2005, almost 1.4 billion people lived below the international poverty line, earning less than \$1.25 per day.”⁹⁵ Smith thought that each one, by looking for his/her own individual interest, contributes to the general well-being: the theory of the invisible hand. In other words, it is not from the kindness of the baker that we get our bread, but from the pursuit of his selfish interest. According to the Scottish economist, human selfishness is the engine of the prosperity of nations. This model must be overcome. Pope Francis, speaking to diplomats in the Holy See, urged the various

⁹³ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 163.

⁹⁴ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 164.

⁹⁵ Charles M.A. Clark & Helen Alford, *Rich and Poor: Rebalancing the Economy*, 6.

governments they represented to open new paths by learning from the pandemic⁹⁶. Among other things, Francis stressed rethinking the economic question. To achieve authentic development, people should go beyond the individualistic conception of the economy to embrace a community conception in which the most important question is no longer: ‘What can I do to maximize my personal profit?’, but rather ‘How can we build together for the well-being of all?’

Human development includes an ethical dimension. It is not simply a question of assessing the economic performance of a country. Development cannot be limited to economic progress alone.⁹⁷ We have to see at what price this performance is achieved. For example, it is unjust if a company makes significant profits while the workers are deprived of individual freedoms as they experience bad work conditions, lack of annual vacation, long working hours per week, low wages etc. A company that acts in this fashion cannot be considered as a model for development because it doesn’t consider the human flourishing of workers. As Paul VI noted, “economics is supposed to be in the service of [human person].”⁹⁸ In the same line, Meghan Clark recalls that “For CST, human persons are the ultimate end of development.”⁹⁹ However, John Paul II observes that the current development model has moved considerably away from concern for the common good, favoring the expression of selfishness. We are witnessing the growing enrichment of a small number of privileged people and the impoverishment of the great masses. This reflects a lack of solidarity. So, “we are thus invited to re-examine the concept of

⁹⁶ <https://www.ncronline.org/news/vatican/pope-exhorts-world-leaders-use-pandemic-create-fairer-economy>

⁹⁷ Terence, McGoldrick. “Indigenous Community Cooperatives:with *Laudato si'*: A New Paradigm for Integral Ecology.” *Journal of Catholic Social Thought*, 17, n. 2 (2020): 300.

⁹⁸ Paul VI, *Populorum progressio*, 26.

⁹⁹ Clark, “Development as Freedom Together,” 16.

development. This of course is not limited to merely satisfying material necessities through an increase of goods, while ignoring the sufferings of the many and making the selfishness of individuals and nations the principal motivation.”¹⁰⁰ Authentic development requires solidarity.¹⁰¹ However, solidarity as a virtue can only be possible if the neighbor is recognized in his/her human dignity.

Solidarity and Human dignity

John Paul II maintains that solidarity can only be effective in a community if each of its members is recognized as a human person. In other words, those who are rich should not be indifferent to the suffering of the poor. The suffering of the poor should also be that of the rich because both share the same humanity. “The exercise of solidarity within each society is valid when its members recognize one another as persons. Those who are more influential, because they have a greater share of goods and common services, should feel responsible for the weaker and be ready to share with them all they possess.”¹⁰² This means solidarity cannot be effective in a community if some people do not consider the human dignity of others. Meghan Clark notes, “Part of the gift and task of human dignity is that everyone must be included as full members of the community.”¹⁰³ More concretely, if in a society, some people are considered as “citizens of lower class” (marginalized) and others, “citizens of upper class” (privileged), it would not be possible to implement solidarity in that community.

¹⁰⁰ John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, n. 10.

¹⁰¹ John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, n. 33.

¹⁰² John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, n. 39.

¹⁰³ Clark, “Development as Freedom Together,” 8.

John Paul II castigates the capitalist spirit of modern society which tends to value people according to their capacity for work as if they were mere instruments. “[Human beings] are never to be used simply as tools or as resources but are always to be treated as subjects and ends in themselves.”¹⁰⁴ The pope recalls that each person must be respected because of his dignity which is non-negotiable and irreducible whatever his/her performance in the social or economic sphere. Meghan Clark goes in the same direction. She writes, “By virtue of being a human person one has a dignity or value that others are obliged to respect.”¹⁰⁵

Besides, the principle of solidarity needs to be taken into consideration at the individual as well as the collective level.

Solidarity helps us to see the "other"-whether a person, people or nation-not just as some kind of instrument, with a work capacity and physical strength to be exploited at low cost and then discarded when no longer useful, but as our ‘neighbor,’ a ‘helper’ (cf. Gen 2:18-20), to be made a sharer, on a par with ourselves, in the banquet of life to which all are equally invited by God.¹⁰⁶

In reality, every human being is created in the image and likeness of God (Gn 1:26). So, before God no human is superior to another. In fact, “our DNA does not include a rich or poor gene. Wealth and poverty are created by human actions and structures.”¹⁰⁷ All human life has the same value in God’s eyes. Furthermore, “The Incarnation of the Son of God shows the equality of all people [including the poor] with regard to dignity.”¹⁰⁸ For John Paul II, “we are one human family. By simply being born into this world, we are of one

¹⁰⁴ Scheid, *The Cosmic Common Good: Religious Grounds for Ecological Ethics*, 19.

¹⁰⁵ Clark, “Development as Freedom Together,” 7.

¹⁰⁶ John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, n. 39.

¹⁰⁷ Clark & Alford, *Rich and Poor: Rebalancing the Economy*, 5.

¹⁰⁸ Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 144.

inheritance and one stock with every other human being.”¹⁰⁹ For Catholic Social Teaching, human life is sacred and deserves respect. Human dignity is the foundation of a moral vision for every society and involves all the principles of Catholic Social Teaching in particular solidarity and common good.

Whether one is a Christian or not, believer or not, respect for human dignity is an essential principle in any human community. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, in its first article, states, “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.”¹¹⁰ However, even if people agree about the necessity to respect human dignity, it is not an easy task to define this concept. Indeed, the definition of dignity is not uniform. There is no universal definition of human dignity. That is why “Clarifying how human dignity functions within United Nations practice is complicated.”¹¹¹

Note, the recognition of the human dignity of every person is not only a principle of action for any individual to achieve the common good through solidarity with the poorest and most marginalized. It should be also a principle of public policy for every state concerned with promoting authentic development, that is to say the development of each and every one of its citizens without exception. John Paul II argues, “For if the essential note of solidarity is to be found in the radical equality of all men and women, then any and every policy that contradicts the basic dignity and human rights of any person or group of persons is a policy that is to be rejected.”¹¹²

¹⁰⁹ John Paul II, *Development and Solidarity* (Message for the celebration of the World Day of Peace, 1987), n. 1.

¹¹⁰ United Nations, *The Universal declaration of Human Rights*, (10 December, 1948), art 1.

¹¹¹ Clark, “Development as Freedom Together,” 5.

¹¹² John Paul II, *Development and Solidarity*, n. 4.

Solidarity is crucial to achieve the common good. Solidarity is about improving the quality of life of everyone, especially people who are most vulnerable in our society. One of the effects of lack of solidarity is the annual death of millions of people. Consider some statistics,

The World Bank estimated that in the early 1990s some eleven million children under the age of five were dying every year in the less-developed nations from preventable illnesses; by the mid-1990s, this figure had risen to more than thirteen million per year ... What they translate to is more than 35,000 needless deaths daily, more than 1,400 young children dying every hour of every day of every week and every month of the year, children whose lives ended before they really had an opportunity to begin.¹¹³

In other words, solidarity is not an option but rather an ideal to be sought in the life of communities. Human life is sacred and deserves respect. Through developmental actions each community is called to protect and promote life. What is at stake when we talk about solidarity in relation with human development is the common destiny of our community. Cypher and Dietz expressed it in this way, “development is of the utmost interest and of the gravest consequence. It touches our shared humanity.”¹¹⁴ In other words, it touches our human dignity which is the foundation of a moral vision for every society as we noted earlier.

In sum, the search for the common good necessarily requires solidarity between members of the same community. “The common good is present ‘in a community of solidarity among active equal agents.’”¹¹⁵ Solidarity, as opposed to individualism, invites everyone to look towards his/her neighbor and to be charitable towards others. However, this charity is only possible if we are able to recognize that “The human person is made in

¹¹³ Cypher and Dietz, *The Process of Economic Development*, 4.

¹¹⁴ Cypher and Dietz, *The Process of Economic Development*, 8.

¹¹⁵ Clark, “Development as Freedom Together,” 21.

the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26), and as such bears a unique relationship to God that confers an inviolable dignity to him or her.”¹¹⁶

Solidarity and Participation

In *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, John Paul II notes that the principle of solidarity is related to social charity. He urges the stronger members of the community to support the weaker members for the good of all. “Those who are more influential, because they have a greater share of goods and common services, should feel responsible for the weaker and be ready to share with them all they possess.”¹¹⁷ Even if the word “solidarity” does not appear specifically in the Scriptures,¹¹⁸ the call for solidarity is present in the New Testament in Paul’s theology of the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:12-26).¹¹⁹ Indeed, the expression “Body of Christ” present in his theology highlights the need of solidarity among the Christians: the vocation to care for one another. That is, if one member of the body suffers, the whole body should suffer with it.

For John Paul II solidarity is a Christian virtue.¹²⁰ Before explaining solidarity as a Christian virtue, a brief definition of virtue is required. According to Jean Porter, a virtue is "a stable quality of the intellect, will, or passions through which an individual can do what morality demands in a particular instance, and do it in the right way, i.e., with an appropriate motivation."¹²¹ Kaminouchi explained the concept of virtue in more detail when he wrote, “Given that human beings are malleable by nature, they can improve

¹¹⁶ Scheid, *The Cosmic Common Good: Religious Grounds for Ecological Ethics*, 19.

¹¹⁷ John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, 39.

¹¹⁸ Gerald J. Beyer, “The Meaning of Solidarity,” 8.

¹¹⁹ Gerald J. Beyer, “The Meaning of Solidarity,” 11.

¹²⁰ John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, n. 40.

¹²¹ Jean Porter, "Virtue," in *The HarperCollins Encyclopedia of Catholicism*, ed. Richard P. McBrien (New York: HarperCollins, 1995): 1316.

themselves by education and training. From this perspective, the virtues indicate the road to such a transformation, and at the same time the direction towards which every human person must progress in order to reach fulfillment.”¹²² As noted earlier, human beings are essentially social by nature. Solidarity as virtue is directed toward the goal of social transformation.¹²³

Christian solidarity is open, oriented towards the neighbor in the sense of the parable of the good Samaritan (cf. Lk 10, 29-37), that is to say toward every person whom God places on my path.¹²⁴ However, solidarity, as Christian virtue, should not turn into an eternal dependence of the weaker members of society on the stronger ones. Solidarity must also promote the participation of disadvantaged members of the community in the achievement of the common good. “The primary problem with inequality is that it denies groups and persons the ability to participate in the life of the institutions that constitute civil society.”¹²⁵ If the poorest members of the community have the right to benefit from the fruits of the civilization, they also have the duty to achieve the common good. John Paul II notes, “Those who are weaker, for their part, in the same spirit of solidarity, should not adopt a purely passive attitude or one that is destructive of the social fabric, but, while claiming their legitimate rights, should do what they can for the good of all.”¹²⁶ Beyer goes in the same direction when he asserts, “Solidarity strives ... to enable all people, including

¹²² Alberto de Mingo Kaminouchi, *An Introduction to Christian Ethics: A New Testament Perspective*, (Minnesota: Liturgical Press Academic, translated by Brother John of Taizé, 2015), 116.

¹²³ Vogt, "Fostering a Catholic commitment to the common good," 400.

¹²⁴ Gianna Pallante and Martial Tatchim Fotso, *Dialogue sur Inculturation et Education en Afrique [In English, Dialogue on Inculturation and Education in Africa]*, (Yaoundé: PUCAC, 2015), 90.

¹²⁵ Todd David Whitmore, “Catholic Social Teaching: Starting with the Common Good,” in Weigert and Kelley, eds., *Living the Catholic Social Tradition* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2005): 69.

¹²⁶ John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, 39.

poor and the marginalized, to participate in and benefit from the common good.”¹²⁷ In reality, to consider that the poor should simply benefit from the common good without being able to participate in it, would be to refuse to take into account their human dignity. The poor certainly need help to survive, but above all they need to be recognized as human beings.

Acting in solidarity to promote the common good should involve participation that is giving everyone access to basic social goods necessary for their fulfillment, but also contributing to the production of these goods. Vogt reminds us that “people flourish when they are able to contribute to the common good and when they have access to all of the social goods that they need to thrive.”¹²⁸ There is an adage in popular wisdom that conveys the importance of this approach: “It is better to teach a person how to fish than to just give a fish.” Teaching a person how to fish means giving an opportunity to become independent, to feed their family, but also to contribute to the functioning of social life through this activity. Generally speaking, “Participation in Catholic social thought denotes a substantive contribution to society”¹²⁹

Moreover, it should be noted that when people are looking for a job, it is not only for economic ends, but for acceptance and belonging in their society. They want to contribute to the promotion of the common good. In fact, “all citizens are duty bound to participate according to gifts and capacities for the sake of the common good.”¹³⁰ Jean Claude Huot, an ethicist, talked about the complaint of a poor man named Jonathan, “who

¹²⁷ Beyer, “The Meaning of Solidarity,” 17.

¹²⁸ Vogt, “Catholic Social Teaching,” 225.

¹²⁹ Beyer, “The Meaning of Solidarity,” 17.

¹³⁰ Rowlands, *Towards a Politics of Communion: Catholic Social Teaching in Dark Times*, 248.

has worked on building sites all his life and wants to keep doing so.” The man says: “I want to contribute to the well-being of the society that I live in, that has welcomed me’, ‘I want to feel useful’”¹³¹. The case of Jonathan is not an isolated case. In fact, “All these people who are excluded from the labor market want one and the same thing: to feel useful, and hence acknowledged. In other words, they want to contribute to the common good of the society they live in, regardless of their nationality, age, or background.”¹³² In other words, participation as well as contributive justice help to achieve the common good in society.

Thus, authentic human development must take into account the right of each individual and all people to participate in the construction of society, in the promotion of the common good.¹³³ In fact, “Everyone has an obligation to promote the common good in making whatever contributions are necessary to improve the lives of all.”¹³⁴

Solidarity and the Universal Destination of Goods

Considering the principle of universal destination of the goods of the earth is necessary for the practice of solidarity in order to achieve the common good. No human being comes into the world with goods. Without denying the right to individual property, Catholic Social Teaching does not absolutize private property. As Pfeil put it: “All creation belongs first to God, and private property is a derivative and conditioned right.”¹³⁵ For

¹³¹ Jean Claude Huot, “The Common Good tested against the Option for the Poor: a perspective for the church’s social commitment,” in *Searching for the Common Good: Philosophical, Theological and Economic Approaches*, edited by Mathias Nebel and Thierry Colland, (Baden-Baden: 2018): 205.

¹³² Huot, “The Common Good tested against the Option for the Poor,” 205.

¹³³ John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, 15

¹³⁴ Thomas Massaro, “Nine Key Themes of Catholic Social Teaching” from *Living Justice*, Second Edition (Sheed and Ward, 2012): 85.

¹³⁵ Margaret R. Pfeil, “Fifty Years after Populorum progressio: Understanding Integral Human Development in Light of Integral Ecology,” *Journal of Catholic Social Thought*, 15, n. 1 (2018), 8.

instance, “If certain landed estates impede the general prosperity because they are extensive, unused or poorly used, or because they bring hardship to peoples or are detrimental to the interests of the country, the common good sometimes demands their expropriation.”¹³⁶ After all, none of us came to this earth with possessions, and none of us take them away at the time of death (Job 1:21). John Paul II says, “It is necessary to state once more the characteristic principle of Christian social doctrine: the goods of this world are originally meant for all. The right to private property is valid and necessary, but it does not nullify the value of this principle.”¹³⁷ The principle of the universal destination of goods maintains that the goods of creation are intended for the benefit of all and everyone.¹³⁸ Francis argues, “Whether believers or not, we are agreed today that the earth is essentially a shared inheritance, whose fruits are meant to benefit everyone...God created the world for everyone.”¹³⁹ It is not morally acceptable that some people are deprived of basic necessities while others live in opulence. The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council clearly explained the principle of universal destination of created goods. They wrote, “God intended the earth and everything in it for the use of all human beings and peoples. Thus, under the leadership of justice and in the company of charity, created goods should flow fairly to all.”¹⁴⁰

Before Vatican II, in the early Church, John Chrysostom is one of the Church fathers who contributed to develop the principle of the universal destination of the goods of the earth. According to John it is a duty for rich people to give alms to the poor. “They

¹³⁶ Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, n. 24.

¹³⁷ John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, 42.

¹³⁸ Anna Rowlands, *Towards a Politics of Communion: Catholic Social Teaching in Dark Times*, 240.

¹³⁹ Francis, *Laudato Si*, 93.

¹⁴⁰ Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 69.

[the rich] must hold their property as stewards for the poor and must share their wealth ... [with] those who are in need.”¹⁴¹ For him, the question of poverty and wealth are intrinsically linked. Poverty can actually stem from the selfishness of a few individuals who refuse to share their wealth with those in need. If the wealth was equitably distributed among people, the problem of poverty would not arise. For this Father of the Church, charity is characteristic of humanity. A person who has no charity ceases to be a human.¹⁴² Chrysostom explains this in one of his homilies on the parable of the rich man and the poor Lazarus. He indicates that the rich man by showing himself indifferent to the suffering of Lazarus has lost his humanity.¹⁴³ If the rich man had a human heart (not a heart of stone), he would have manifested compassion towards Lazarus' situation. Chrysostom thinks the necessity for the rich to practice alms is a requirement of justice in the sight of God. If the goods of the earth belong to all, then the sharing of these goods appears for John as a duty of solidarity for the rich towards the disadvantaged.

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus through a parable of the rich fool (12:16-21) warns against the temptation to accumulate goods in order to enjoy them selfishly. The rich man after having had a large harvest did not think of the possibility of sharing these goods with the poor. He thought only of his personal enjoyment: “This is what I shall do: I shall tear down my barns and build larger ones. There I shall store all my grain and other goods and I shall say to myself, ‘Now as for you, you have many good things stored up for many years, rest, eat, drink, be merry!’” (12:18-19). In his commentaries on the gospel parables, Pierre Prigent, points out that the problem of this rich man is that he puts the created goods

¹⁴¹ St John Chrysostom, *On Wealth and Poverty*, 14.

¹⁴² *Riches et pauvres dans l'Église ancienne*, 245.

¹⁴³ *Riches et pauvres dans l'Église ancienne*, 225.

at the center of his life.¹⁴⁴ He believes that by accumulating goods, he could rest without any concern for many years. However, the Creator said to him that he will not enjoy these goods as he had planned, “You fool, this night your life will be demanded of you; and the things you have prepared, to whom will they belong?” (12: 20). This rhetorical question of the Creator makes clear the fact that we are only usufructuaries of the goods we have and not owners in the absolute sense. John Paul II rightly notes, “Interdependence must be transformed into solidarity, based upon the principle that the goods of creation are meant for all. That which human industry produces through the processing of raw materials, with the contribution of work, must serve equally for the good of all.”¹⁴⁵

Solidarity Among Nations for Peace

Peace is an important component of the common good. In the Catholic tradition, peace is much more than the absence of war or violence but also refers to the achievement of a just order and Integral human development. Paul VI made a close connection between development and peace. He asserted, “development is a new name for peace.”¹⁴⁶ In this last section of our first chapter, we are going to see how solidarity among nations helps to achieve peace.

Pope John Paul II considers solidarity as a necessary virtue to achieve integral human development, that is the development of the whole person and every person. For him, the practice of solidarity has both an individual and community dimension. In other words, the practice of solidarity must take place not only between individuals, but also

¹⁴⁴ Pierre Pringent, *Les Paraboles des évangiles. L'Évangile des Paraboles*, (Paris : Edilivre, 2017), 107.

¹⁴⁵ John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, n. 39.

¹⁴⁶ Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, n. 87. This is my own translation from the French version of the official document issue by the Vatican.

between nations. In fact, “Solidarity is a virtue of communities as well as of individuals.”¹⁴⁷ John Paul II underlines the moral obligation of the rich countries of the North to support the poor countries of the South in their development process. This exhortation that John Paul II launches towards the countries of the North to help the countries of the South is based on an empirical observation: the increase in wealth in certain regions of the so-called developed world is accompanied by an expansion of the poverty in other so-called developing regions. The Pope expresses this imbalance of resources in these terms, “The abundance of goods and services available in some parts of the world, particularly in the developed North, is matched in the South by an unacceptable delay, and it is precisely in this geopolitical area that a major part of the human race lives.”¹⁴⁸ This translates into a lack of solidarity among nations.

In the field of economics of development, one cannot address the issue of development in developing countries without taking into account the interactions that they have with the so-called developed countries as John Paul II did. The question here is whether or not the wealth of western countries is generated by the exploitation of developing countries. Many nations in Africa continue to be among what the United Nations categorizes as the Least Developed Countries (LDCs), due to their external dependence on their former colonizers. Although these countries are politically independent, they maintain a form of economic dependence on their former masters. Todaro argues that “The phenomenon of underdevelopment needs to be viewed in a national and an international context. Economic and social forces, both internal and

¹⁴⁷ Jacquineau Azetsop, “The Return to the Common,” 116.

¹⁴⁸ John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, n. 14.

external, are responsible for the poverty.”¹⁴⁹ It is important to note that when Todaro talks about underdevelopment, he does not mean the opposite of development (underdeveloped is not undeveloped). The state of underdevelopment of a LDC actually focuses upon the presence of some external and internal factors which prevent the country from expressing its full potential. Donal Dorr confirms this truth when he writes, “In addition to the kind of economic exploitation and political oppression that occurs so frequently, there is a less obvious form of cultural ‘imperialism’ that western nations exercise over other peoples.”¹⁵⁰ Yet, the search for solutions to the development problems of the LDCs must take into consideration their cultures. In other words, the question of development should always be contextualized. Development involves well-being, the fulfillment of a people. It would be a mistake for western countries to assume that they really know what is good for LDCs. “Solidarity means taking seriously the different value systems of the various cultures, rather than the imposition of the western model of development on other peoples.”¹⁵¹ The question of development is related to anthropology. That is to say when thinking and working for development, it is always important to involve those concerned as actors in their own development. It must be acknowledged that their priorities may not converge with what we envision for them. This approach respects the dignity of these people. After all, progress aims to allow people to contribute to their own development. They know what constitutes their happiness.

¹⁴⁹ Todaro, *Economic Development in the Third World*, 43.

¹⁵⁰ Donal Dorr, “Solidarity and Integral Human Development,” in *The Logic of Solidarity: Commentaries on Pope John Paul II's Encyclical on Social Concern*, edited by Baum, Gregory and Robert Ellsberg, (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1989):149.

¹⁵¹ Dorr, “Solidarity and Integral Human Development,” 150.

Some components of integral human development such as the right to education for children may seem obvious to one people, but not to another. In the United States for instance, there is no need to convince parents that they must send their children to school. One does not need to provide argument for it. But in some regions in my country, Cameroon, many parents still think that it is a waste of money and a waste of time to send children to school because they want them to work on their farmland. In these cultures, a child is considered as a labor force for agriculture. If someone wants to promote education as part of development in those places, s/he should take into consideration their way of thinking. Todaro stated, “what constitutes the good life is a perennial question and, as such, [development] necessarily involves values and value judgments.”¹⁵²

For John Paul II, Western countries have a moral obligation to show solidarity with southern countries in their development process by providing them with concrete aid. He says, “We [cannot] pretend not to see the responsibility of the developed nations, which have not always, at least in due measure, felt the duty to help countries separated from the affluent world to which they themselves belong.”¹⁵³ Unfortunately, instead of receiving help, many countries from the South have been exploited by the Western countries. Todaro writes, “the developed countries need to review and readjust their traditional economic policies vis-a-vis the Third World, especially in the areas of trade, aid, and technology transfer.”¹⁵⁴ To use an analogy, some Least Developed Countries (LDC’s) in Africa are like people who have their legs broken and then are asked to run in the development competition, despite their physical handicap.

¹⁵² Todaro, *Economic Development in the Third World*, 24.

¹⁵³ John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, 16.

¹⁵⁴ Todaro, *Economic Development in the Third World*, 224.

When John Paul II speaks of aid, it is not a matter of aid which maintains a state of eternal dependence, but which enables the poor countries of the South to be able, in the same way as the nations of the North, to benefit from the universal goods of the creation and to contribute to the achievement of the common good.

For John Paul II, solidarity among nations is crucial for maintaining peace. In other words, international solidarity is not an option, but a necessity if we want to preserve global peace. In a world where some nations languish in misery, while others live in opulence, violence can be expressed at any time by those who feel they are victims of injustice. John Paul II expresses this risk of violence in these words, “Peoples [poor countries, for instance] excluded from the fair distribution of the goods originally destined for all could ask themselves: why not respond with violence to those who first treat us with violence?”¹⁵⁵ This means that solidarity between nations does not only profit poor countries but also rich countries in terms of peace.

One day, talking with a Cameroonian friend who has lived in London for more than a decade, I asked him if he was considering the possibility of returning to live in Cameroon. He told me that in Cameroon he no longer felt safe. Because he said: “In Cameroon if I drive in my luxury car, many people will be jealous and will want to attack me. However, I do not have this security concern here in London.” Indeed, wealthy people are generally forced in Cameroon, as is the case in many African countries, to allocate significant financial resources for their security and that of their property. This concern for the security of the rich among the poor is true both at the national and international level. In fact, “Nations, like persons, are linked in a system that makes them dependent on each

¹⁵⁵ John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, n. 10.

other. Within this international system, the powerful and wealthy nations are morally bound to resist the temptation to ‘imperialism’ and ‘hegemony’; in other words, they must not dominate, oppress, or exploit the others.”¹⁵⁶ Otherwise it would be a threat to peace in the world.

The importance of the phenomenon of illegal immigration for several decades between sub-Saharan Africa and the countries of the European Union constitutes a threat to peace and clearly reflects the need to develop solidarity between the countries of the North and those from South. “The pope [John Paul II] notes that the lack of solidarity between the nations has ‘disastrous consequences’ for the weaker ones; but it also has serious ‘negatives effects even in the rich countries’”¹⁵⁷ As long as poverty continues to grow in developing countries in Africa, the desire for young Africans to immigrate to European Union countries will always be present. To reduce this phenomenon of illegal immigration – which continues to cause many victims because many Africans die in the sea and in the desert – it is important that the countries of the North practice towards the countries of the South a solidarity that will allow the latter to achieve development for their people by offering more opportunities to their citizens, especially to the youth. What is true for sub-Saharan Africa and the European Union in terms of immigration is also true for Mexico and the United States. No nation can live in a vacuum, caring only for its own development without compromising peace in the world.

When by way of illegal immigration, some Africans arrive in Italy, which is one of the countries of the European Union closest to the African coasts, have no work, they often

¹⁵⁶ Dorr, “Solidarity and Integral Human Development,” 149.

¹⁵⁷ Dorr, “Solidarity and Integral Human Development,” 151.

practice acts of violence and banditry in order to survive. These actions have even contributed in that country to the formation of both unconscious and overtly explicit racial bias. One day walking down a street in Rome with an Italian confrere, an individual suddenly snatched his wallet while he was distracted. He became furious and without seeing the thief, he claimed that the person who did that was certainly a Black person. Having seen the individual in question, I told him that this thief was not Black but rather White. He added that if he was a white, he must be a Moroccan (North African). This Italian confrere was convinced without evidence that the thief could not be someone other than an African. This shows that he has probably been socialized in a context in which people tend “to associate dark skin color with danger, stupidity, incompetence, immorality, promiscuity, and criminality.”¹⁵⁸ The social and cultural location can seriously distort the conscience of people.¹⁵⁹ Effective solidarity between nations can resolve the “injustice of the poor distribution of the goods and services originally intended for all.”¹⁶⁰ Of course, the imbalance of resources between nations is one of the causes of illegal immigration. John Paul II believes that solidarity is not only the path to the development of peoples, but also the path to peace, which is an important element of the common good.¹⁶¹ Without peace, there is no fulfillment for people in community.

Furthermore, when John Paul II considers solidarity between nations, he does not understand it only in the sense of North-South relations, but also in South-South relations.

¹⁵⁸ Bryan Massingale, "Conscience Formation and the Challenge of Unconscious Racial Bias," in *Conscience and Catholicism: Rights, Responsibilities, and Institutional Responses*, ed. David E. DeCosse and Kristin Heyer, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2015), 53.

¹⁵⁹ Patricia Lamoureux and Paul J. Waddell, "Conscience: Exploring a Gift Too Precious to Lose," in *The Christian Moral Life: Faithful Discipleship for a Global Society* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2010), 159.

¹⁶⁰ John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, n. 28

¹⁶¹ John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, n. 39.

The countries of the South must pool their forces to get out of underdevelopment. He says, “the developing nations themselves have the duty to practice solidarity among themselves and with the neediest countries of the world.”¹⁶² A nation though poor still has something to share with other nations that may be more in need. If the Pope considers international solidarity as a path to development for poor countries, he does not make this virtue the miracle solution to promote the common good. Development entails a firm will on the part of each people to improve their living conditions by enhancing what constitutes their potential. “Development demands above all a spirit of initiative on the part of the countries which need it. Each of them must act in accordance with its own responsibilities, not expecting everything from the more favored countries, and acting in collaboration with others in the same situation...Each must make itself capable of initiatives responding to its own needs as a society.”¹⁶³

In short, solidarity among nations is important for the promotion of human development and peace. While it is true that the countries of the North have a moral obligation to come to the aid of the countries of the South, it is no less true that the countries of the South must also develop effective solidarity among themselves in order to seek solutions to get out of underdevelopment.

Conclusion

In conclusion, for John Paul II the search for the common good is a collective and highly political virtue.¹⁶⁴ We cannot achieve it without the practice of solidarity. One of

¹⁶² John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, n. 45.

¹⁶³ John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, n. 44.

¹⁶⁴ Mathias Nebel, “A Theological Conclusion,” in *Searching for the Common Good: Philosophical, Theological and Economic Approaches*, edited by Mathias Nebel and Thierry Colland (Baden-Baden: 2018): 225.

the key criteria for evaluating the common good in a society is solidarity with the vulnerable and marginalized.¹⁶⁵ The practice of solidarity as a Christian virtue constitutes an aspiration to ensure authentic development for each individual, people or nation. We cannot claim to be human and still not show solidarity in the face of the suffering of our neighbor who is in need. Recognizing that everyone is created in the image and likeness of God and that the goods of creation are originally intended for all should encourage the practice of solidarity with those in need. Finally, solidarity also means giving the poor the possibility of contributing to the achievement of the common good. Without this possibility for everyone to participate and enjoy the goods of creation, peace in the world would be compromised.

¹⁶⁵ Yuengert Andrew M., “What is ‘Sustainable Prosperity for All’ in the Catholic Social Tradition?” in *The True Wealth of Nations*, edited by Daniel K (Oxford University Press: 2010): 42.

Chapter 2: The Common Good in the Vision of Francis: Care for Creation

Introduction

The key purpose of this second chapter is to show how Francis expands the meaning of the common good primarily with a concern for all creation in Catholic social teaching. For Francis, integral and sustainable human development involves care for creation embracing human and non-human creatures. Francis shows how this principle of the common good must imperatively be taken into account in the urgent care for the earth, our common home, in an integral ecology approach.¹⁶⁶ As Massaro stated, “Perhaps the most compelling example of an urgent common good issue today involves the natural environment.”¹⁶⁷ For instance, by assessing the actual observations of the climate system over the past six year, scientists have confirmed that it is warming up.¹⁶⁸

More concretely, in this chapter, I propose to do the following: first, to demonstrate that Francis’ teaching on environment does not come *ex nihilo*. Even if *Laudato si’* (LS) represents an innovation¹⁶⁹ in the development of Catholic social teaching (CST), Francis has built his teaching on earlier foundations. Second, I show that Francis’ expansion of John Paul II’s understanding of the common good, rooted in integral ecology, is an ecclesial response to environmental degradation which constitutes a threat both for the earth and for humanity. In particular, the poorest are the most affected. This situation requires an ecological conversion. Third, I explain that the action to build up the common

¹⁶⁶ Vincent J. Miller, “Integral ecology: Francis’s spiritual and Moral vision of interconnectedness,” in *The Theological and Ecological Vision of Laudato si’*, ed. Vincent J. Miller (Bloomsbury, 2017): 11-12.

¹⁶⁷ Thomas Massaro, “Nine Key Themes of Catholic Social Teaching” from *Living Justice*, Second Edition (Sheed and Ward, 2012): 86.

¹⁶⁸ IPCC, The intergovernmental panel on Climate Change, 2023.

¹⁶⁹ Lisa Sowle Cahill, “Laudato Si’: Reframing Catholic Social Ethics,” *The Heythrop Journal* 59, no. 6 (2018): 887.

good entails care for God’s creation. Fourth, advocate for the necessity of international regulation of global commons which are part of the common good. In fact, “there is a need for international cooperation or perhaps even an international government authority to address threats to the common good that individual nations cannot address alone.”¹⁷⁰

Theological Background of *LS*: Previous Papal Teaching on the Environment

By choosing Francis of Assisi as his namesake and model, Francis undoubtedly was sending a signal about his priorities. Indeed, “Francis of Assisi is a patron saint of those who promote ecology and a person who cared for both creation and the poor.”¹⁷¹ So, the publication of the encyclical of Pope Francis on the environment was not actually a surprise. Nevertheless, while one cannot deny that “*Laudato Si’* (LS) is unique in the legacy of Catholic social teaching”¹⁷² in the sense that “It is the first time that the papal ministry has addresses ecological issues deeply and extensively,”¹⁷³ it is also true that Francis’ teaching on the environment built on earlier contributions. This section will briefly mention the contributions of Paul VI, John Paul II, and Benedict XVI, which were developed later in LS by Francis, in a spirit of continuity with his predecessors.

Pope Paul VI, in his encyclical letter *Octagesima adveniens*, “addressed the inseparable relationship/interdependence between human life and the natural

¹⁷⁰ Christopher Vogt, “Laudato Si’: Social Analysis and Political Engagement in the Tradition of Catholic Social Thought,” in *Integral Ecology for a More Sustainable World: Dialogues with Laudato Si’*, ed. Dennis O’Hara, Matthew Eaton, and Michael Ross, (Lexington Books, 2020): 18.

¹⁷¹ Kevin W. Irwin, “Background to and Contributions of *Laudato si’*: On Care for our Common Home,” in *All Creation Is Connected: Voices in Response to Pope Francis’s Encyclical on Ecology*, ed. Daniel R. DiLeo (Winona, MN: Anselm Academic, 2018): 24.

¹⁷² Christina Zenner Peppard, “Commentary on *Laudato si’* (On Care For Our Common Home),” in *Modern Catholic Teaching: Commentaries and Interpretations*, edited by Kenneth R. Himes, (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2018): 515.

¹⁷³ Alexandre A Martins, “*Laudato Si’*: Integral ecology and the preferential option for the poor,” n.p., e-publications@marquette, January, 2018.

environment.”¹⁷⁴ He warns against the dangers for humanity of an abusive and disorderly exploitation of nature.¹⁷⁵ Paul VI wrote, “Due to an ill-considered exploitation of nature, humanity runs the risk of destroying it and becoming in turn a victim of this degradation.”¹⁷⁶ For him, by destroying the natural environment, human beings destroy themselves. In fact, “Paul VI recognized that there is a symbiotic relationship between humans and non-humans’ creation.”¹⁷⁷ Moreover, Paul VI did not raise the issue of environment only for a Catholic audience. As Christiana Zenner notes, “Paul VI was the first pope to address the UN on matters of environmental degradation.”¹⁷⁸ On the 25th Anniversary of the FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization) of the United Nations, Paul VI spoke about the potential for an ecological degradation. For him, “the most extraordinary scientific advances, the most amazing technical abilities, the most astonishing economic growth, unless they are accompanied by authentic social and moral progress will definitively turn against [human beings].”¹⁷⁹ Hence, he emphasized the urgent need for a radical change of behavior in the conduct of humanity in its relation to the environment.¹⁸⁰ In short, Paul VI simply wanted to invite humanity to be aware of the fact that any human work that destroys the earth would also lead to its self-destruction.¹⁸¹

After Paul VI, John Paul II significantly develops the theme of environmental stewardship. Christophère Ngolele, S.J., a Congolese theologian, points out, “John Paul II

¹⁷⁴ Peter Kodwo Turkson, “The Evolution of the Concept of Integral Ecology in Papal Teaching,” in *Integral Ecology for a More Sustainable World: Dialogues with Laudato Si’*, ed. Dennis O’Hara, Matthew Eaton, and Michael Ross, (Lexington Books, 2020): xii.

¹⁷⁵ Paul VI, *Octagesima adveniens*, 21.

¹⁷⁶ Paul VI, *Octagesima adveniens*, 21.

¹⁷⁷ Kevin W. Irwin, “Background to and contributions of *Laudato si’*,” 17

¹⁷⁸ Christiana Zenner Peppard, “Commentary on *Laudato si’*,” 520.

¹⁷⁹ Address to FAO on the 25th Anniversary of its Institution (16 November 1970), 4.

¹⁸⁰ Address to FAO on the 25th Anniversary of its Institution (16 November 1970), 4.

¹⁸¹ Christiana Zenner Peppard, “Commentary on *Laudato si’*,” 520.

showed a strong awareness of the environment crisis and a willingness to contribute to solving this crisis.”¹⁸² For instance, in his first encyclical *Redemptor Hominis*, he made the point that human beings often seem to “see no other meaning in their natural environment than what serves immediate use and consumption.”¹⁸³ Then, he calls for an ecological conversion which entails intense changes in our lifestyle but also our model of production and consumption. By “[warning] about the threat of pollution to nature,”¹⁸⁴ he stated that this pollution arises mainly from countries experiencing rapid industrialization to increase their economic progress.¹⁸⁵ Yet, as we noted earlier in chapter 1, authentic development specifies John Paul II in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (SRS) is the integral human development which considers the effects of the ecological crisis on the fulfillment of people. Cardinal Peter Kodwo Turkson writes, “[John Paul II] reminds us of the effects of a certain type of development on the quality of life in industrialized areas – the sort of development that causes pollution of the environment, with serious consequences for the health of populations.”¹⁸⁶ Indeed, in so-called developed countries, many people are sometimes diagnosed with cancers because of environmental pollution.

Moreover, in SRS, John Paul II highlights our human vocation to care for other creatures. People should not only care about their neighbors but also about non-human creatures. The pontiff

¹⁸² Christophère Ngolele, “African Wisdom in Dialogue with *Laudato si'*: An Environmental Ethics Based on the Paradigm of Recognition and Sacred Care,” *Journal of Catholic Social Thought*, 16, n. 1 (2019), 11.

¹⁸³ John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, 5.

¹⁸⁴ Turkson, “The Evolution of the Concept of Integral Ecology,” xiii.

¹⁸⁵ John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, 8.

¹⁸⁶ Turkson, “The Evolution of the Concept of Integral Ecology,” xiii.

reminds us that dominion over creation does not mean that we can do whatever we want with other creatures. But we “must remain subject to the will of God, who imposes limits upon [our] use and dominion over things (cf. Gen 2:16-17),”¹⁸⁷ In other words, “the dominion granted to humans by God is not an absolute power ... one cannot speak of freedom to ‘use and misuse’ or to dispose of things as one pleases”¹⁸⁸

Another consideration that John Paul II raised in SRS in relation to the environment is that we need to use natural resources with a concern for future generations. For him our solidarity needs to go beyond our fellow human beings currently living. We need to realize that “natural resources are limited. Not all resources are renewable. If we treat them as inexhaustible and use them with absolute dominion, then we seriously endanger their availability in our own time and, above all, for future generations.”¹⁸⁹ Since the earth is a gift we received from the creator, we need to protect it not only for our well-being but also for the well-being of future generations. As we will see later, the concept of intergenerational solidarity will prepare the way for the expansion of the common good by Francis in *Laudato si’*. At this point, let us turn to the contribution of Benedict XVI, known in his days as the “green pope.”¹⁹⁰

Benedict XVI is the immediate predecessor of Francis.¹⁹¹ He is considered by many to be one of the greatest theologians of the Western world in the twentieth century. In his encyclical letter *Caritas in veritate* (CV), Benedict addresses the question of the environment in chapter 4. According to Meghan Clark, “The natural environment receives

¹⁸⁷ John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, n. 29.

¹⁸⁸ Irwin, “Background to and contributions of *Laudato si’*,” 20.

¹⁸⁹ Turkson, “The Evolution of the Concept of Integral Ecology,” xiii.

¹⁹⁰ Irwin, “Background to and contributions of *Laudato si’*,” 23.

¹⁹¹ Francis was elected after the resignation of Benedict XVI from his office as pope on February 11, 2013.

greater attention [in CV] than in any previous papal encyclical.”¹⁹² Ngolele, S.J., also notes, “*Caritas in Veritate* is the first official document from the papal magisterium that contains a clear pronouncement on the issue of ecology.”¹⁹³

For Benedict, the natural environment reveals first and foremost the love of God for humanity.¹⁹⁴ Indeed, “The environment is God’s gift to everyone, and in our use of it we have a responsibility towards the poor, towards future generations and towards humanity as whole.”¹⁹⁵ Several months later, on his message for the celebration of the World Day of Peace (2010), Benedict almost repeats what he said in CV, “The environment must be seen as God’s gift to all people, and the use we make of it entails a shared responsibility for all humanity, especially the poor and future generations.”¹⁹⁶ A gift is an expression of love from the giver to the recipient. When we receive a gift from a friend, we take care of it out of respect for that friend and to express our gratitude to him/her. The environment is not a product of man. That is to say, we are not the owners. The environment is a gift from God and a gift not only to humans now living. We must take care of it with an attention not only to our own needs, but also the needs of the poor and future generations. Benedict XV says, “we must recognize our grave duty to hand the earth on to future generations in such a condition that they too can worthily inhabit it and continue to cultivate it.”¹⁹⁷ In other words, taking care of our environment for future generations is not a favor we grant to them, but our duty. If we consider that we too received

¹⁹² Meghan J. Clark, “Commentary on *Caritas in veritate* (On Integral Human Development in Charity and Truth),” in *Modern Catholic Teaching: Commentaries and Interpretations*, edited by Kenneth R. Himes, (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2018): 485.

¹⁹³ Ngolele, “African Wisdom in Dialogue with *Laudato Si’*,” 12.

¹⁹⁴ Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate*, n. 48.

¹⁹⁵ Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate*, n. 48.

¹⁹⁶ Benedict XVI, Message for the celebration of the World Day of Peace (1 January 2010), n.2.

¹⁹⁷ Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate*, n. 50.

the earth in heritage from our ancestors, those who lived before us on this earth, we have no right to destroy it. In fact, “The reality of human solidarity, which is a benefit for us, also imposes a duty.”¹⁹⁸

For Benedict, taking care of the environment is an ethical imperative. In fact, “the way humanity treats the environment influences the way it treats itself and vice versa.”¹⁹⁹ Said differently, there is a correlation between environment and humanity. Indeed, human beings are not only in relationship with God and their fellows. They are also in relationship with the earth, and reciprocally. For Benedict, “nature and society/culture are integrated such that the decline and desertification of the one lead to the impoverishment of the other.”²⁰⁰

Two years before the publication of *Caritas in veritate*, Benedict XVI, on the celebration of world water day 2007, addressed the ecological concern related to access to unpolluted water. Access to safe drinking water is a basic need. So, he reminded the international community that water is an essential component of the common goods of the human family.²⁰¹ Benedict wrote, “[Water] constitutes an essential element for life; the management of this precious resource must enable all to have access to it, especially those who live in conditions of poverty, and must guarantee the liveability of the planet for both the present and future generations.”²⁰² If the ecological concern, at first sight, could seem, for some people, outside the scope of the competence of the Church which deals with the spiritual life of its faithful, Benedict reminds us that to protect humanity from self-

¹⁹⁸ Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, n. 17.

¹⁹⁹ Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate*, n. 51.

²⁰⁰ Kevin W. Irwin, “Background to and contributions of *Laudato si’*,” 23.

²⁰¹ Benedict XVI, Message on the Celebration of world water day (22 March 2007).

²⁰² Benedict XVI, Message on the Celebration of world water day (22 March 2007).

destruction is part of the mission of the Church.²⁰³ “There is no justification for the church to close her eyes in the presence of challenges faced by human beings, such as the environmental crisis.”²⁰⁴ The environment must be seen as God’s gift to all people, and the use we make of it entails a shared responsibility for all humanity, especially the poor and future generations.

In sum, let us recall that the goal of this section was to present some elements of the Catholic social tradition in which Pope Francis built his teaching on the environment. In the next section, I will turn to his encyclical letter, *Laudato si’* itself. I will focus my attention on the context in which Francis expands the concept of the common good.

Expansion of the Principle of the Common good in *LS*

The document *Laudato si’*, was without doubt consciously intended by Pope Francis to be an integral part of the social doctrine of the Church. “It is my hope,” he wrote, “that this Encyclical Letter, which is now added to the body of the Church’s social teaching, can help us to acknowledge the appeal, immensity and urgency of the challenge we face.”²⁰⁵ *LS* aims to inspire people to care for our common home better and to do so while also attending to the needs of people on the margins. On the issue of environment, Francis did not speak only to Catholics and people of good will, but to every person living on the earth.²⁰⁶ Note that “[*LS*] is the first encyclical in the Catholic Church to centralize

²⁰³ Benedict XV, *Caritas in veritate*, n. 59.

²⁰⁴ Ngolele, “African Wisdom in Dialogue with *Laudato Si’*,” 11.

²⁰⁵ Francis, *Laudato si’*, n. 15.

²⁰⁶ Christina Zenner, “Commentary on *Laudato si’*,” 515.

ecology.”²⁰⁷ Ngolele goes further when he writes, “In LS, Francis offers the most explicit pronouncement on the environmental crisis ever made by a Roman pontiff.”²⁰⁸

By addressing contemporary environmental degradation in LS, Francis reshapes ethical principles, among them the common good, a concept that he uses 29 times.²⁰⁹ The Pope analyzes the concept of the common good in a spirit of both fidelity and creativity. Fidelity in the sense that he quotes the definition of the common good given by the Second Vatican Council²¹⁰ that we mentioned earlier in chapter 1, that is the “sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily.”²¹¹ Creativity, because he grows this concept in connection with the challenge posed by the ecological crisis to humanity. In fact, the principles of Catholic social teaching are not fixed realities. Their understanding evolves according to the new situations with which humanity is confronted. A Vincentian theologian, Daniel Pilario, CM, recognizes this, explaining, “If the Catholic social teaching is a process of engagement with the changing situations where Christians find themselves, it should also evolve and develop ... As the world develops, our understanding of ourselves also changes.”²¹² Having said that, let us return specifically to the common good. Francis links this notion to the principle of integral ecology in response to environmental degradation which constitutes a threat both for the earth and for humanity.²¹³

²⁰⁷ Christina Zenner, “Commentary on *Laudato si’*,” 515.

²⁰⁸ Christophere Ngolele, “African Wisdom in Dialogue with *Laudato Si’*,” 13.

²⁰⁹ Daniel P. Scheid, “*Laudato si’* and the development of Catholic Social Teaching,” 183.

²¹⁰ Francis, *Laudato si’*, n. 159.

²¹¹ Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 26

²¹² Daniel Franklin E. Pilario, *Faith in Action: Catholic Social Teaching on the Ground*, (Quezon City: Adamson University, 2017): xix.

²¹³ Francis, *Laudato si’*, n. 159.

Ecological Analysis of Francis: Environmental Degradation

The expansion of the common good by Francis stems from his careful examination of what is happening in our world. Since John XXIII, “Seeing” constitutes the first step²¹⁴ in engaging any issue in the methodological approach of CST.²¹⁵ Of course, seeing is not a passive viewing of the world. Vogt notes, “‘Seeing’ entails much more than mere observation. It requires a careful analysis of the nature and causes of a particular social [or ecological] problem.”²¹⁶ That careful analysis implies using both the lens of natural and social sciences. This is exactly the approach used by Francis in *LS*. The pope, using current scientific data, vigorously argues “the earth, our home, is beginning to look more and more like an immense pile of filth.”²¹⁷ Francis’s approach shows there is no conflict between religion and science, but rather integration. He uses “the information from many sciences concerned about environmental degradation, from physics and geology to environmental science.”²¹⁸ To consider an integrative relationship between religion and science is to recognize the uniqueness of the human person. Indeed, faith and reason are two realities which characterize human beings. The integrative relationship between religion and science is increasingly visible today in the environmental crisis. If science can establish the facts about the destruction of the planet, it is the role of religion to change human behavior. In other words, the environmental ethic that emerges in the ecological reflection of Pope Francis in *LS* is a place par excellence where the integration between religion and science is emphasized.

²¹⁴ The other two steps are “Judging” and “Acting.”

²¹⁵ Vogt, “*Laudato Si*’: Social Analysis and Political Engagement,” 15.

²¹⁶ Vogt, “*Laudato Si*’: Social Analysis and Political Engagement,” 15.

²¹⁷ Francis, *Laudato Si*, 21.

²¹⁸ Ngolele, “African Wisdom in Dialogue with *Laudato Si*’,” 14.

For Francis, the earth is crying out because of our irresponsible use of the goods of creation.²¹⁹ Uwimeza, S.J., a Rwandan theologian, goes in the same direction when he writes, “the escalating destruction of the environment is mostly due to human activity.”²²⁰ Francis explains, “When human beings place themselves at the center, they give absolute priority to immediate convenience and all else become relative.”²²¹ The environmental degradation affects the climate which is “a common good, belonging to all and meant for all.”²²² It also affects the well-being of humanity and especially the poor who are the most susceptible to the effects of the ecological crisis.²²³ For instance, poor people are deprived of access to safe drinkable water which is a fundamental human right.²²⁴ Like Benedict XVI, Francis observes that “One particularly serious problem is the quality of water available to the poor.”²²⁵ Note that water access is getting worse for the poor due to climate change. While it is true that water poverty is a global issue, it is also true that many Least Developed Countries (LDCs) in Africa are most affected.²²⁶ In those countries, seeking the common good for society would necessarily include addressing the issue of water. In short, “Seeing” allows Francis to realize that the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor come together. For him, in our commitment to achieve the common good, we should always remember that “everything is interconnected.”²²⁷ This is the foundation of integral ecology.

²¹⁹ Francis, *Laudato Si*, 2.

²²⁰ Marcel Uwimeza, “African Spirituality and Its Contribution to the Ecological Crisis,” *La Civiltà Cattolica*, 1, no. 9 (October 14, 2017/ Last Updated July 3, 2020), n.p.

²²¹ Francis, *Laudato Si*, 122.

²²² Francis, *Laudato Si*, 2.

²²³ Francis, *Laudato Si*, 48.

²²⁴ Francis, *Laudato Si*, 30.

²²⁵ Francis, *Laudato Si*, 29.

²²⁶ Francis, *Laudato Si*, 28.

²²⁷ Francis, *Laudato Si*, 70.

Integral Ecology Expands the Common Good

The principle of integral ecology is a positive response that Francis formulated to the environmental crisis in chapter 4 of LS.²²⁸ Integral ecology is rooted on the “belief that everything in the world is interconnected.”²²⁹ In fact, the good of people cannot be separated from the good of the planet as a whole.²³⁰ According to Scheid, “Integral ecology means that we have to begin seeing environmental and social problems together, not as isolated phenomena.”²³¹

Before Francis, John Paul II worked to develop an ethic of solidarity in SRS. As noted in the first chapter, he defined solidarity as, “a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because we are responsible for all.”²³² For him, “solidarity is based on the underlying fact of human interdependence.”²³³ With the notion of integral ecology, Francis broadened the concept of solidarity. Miller affirms, “Integral ecology can be thought of as expansion of solidarity from social interdependence with other human beings, to human interdependence with the rest of creation.”²³⁴ In fact, “human life is grounded in three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: with God, with our neighbor, and with the earth itself”²³⁵ Integral ecology reminds us that we have often forgotten the relationship with the earth.

²²⁸ Miller, “Integral ecology,” 12.

²²⁹ Miller, “Integral ecology,” 12.

²³⁰ Vogt, “Catholic Social Teaching,” 223.

²³¹ Scheid, “*Laudato si’* and the development of Catholic Social Teaching,” 189.

²³² John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, n. 38.

²³³ Miller, “Integral ecology,” 19.

²³⁴ Miller, “Integral ecology,” 19.

²³⁵ Francis, *Laudato Si’*, 66.

Since “solidarity is actually a vital corollary to the common good, because it actively supports and promotes people to work for the common good”²³⁶ integral ecology also entails the expansion of the common good to something that might be named the “ecological common good.” Scheid called that the planetary and cosmic common good.²³⁷ In that vision, the common good includes not only the good of people, but also the good of the earth, “our mother and sister.”

Integral ecology stresses that non-human creatures are intrinsically important, independent of their usefulness to human beings. While John Paul II stresses the interdependence among people and nations, as noted in the first chapter, Francis extends our interdependence with all creation. “Each creature has its own purpose. None is superfluous.”²³⁸ Francis writes, “I would also observe that each distinct species has a value in itself.”²³⁹ They contribute to the well-being of our environment and deserve respect on the part of humanity. Scheid asserts, “The ecological crisis has made us aware of our radical interdependence with all creation and of the human responsibility to care for the common good of all creatures.”²⁴⁰ Note that our responsibility to care for the common good of all creatures does not mean that we can put non-human creatures on an equal footing with humanity.²⁴¹ Although this is actually a point of debate among environmental ethicists, officially speaking Catholic social teaching remains “anthropocentric”: people have a special place in creation. For, every human being is created in the image and likeness of God (Gn 1:26). Meghan Clark goes further when she writes, “Among all living creatures,

²³⁶ Scheid, *The Cosmic Common Good: Religious Grounds for Ecological Ethics*, 83.

²³⁷ Scheid, “*Laudato Si*’ and the development of Catholic Social Teaching,” 184.

²³⁸ Ngolele, “African Wisdom in Dialogue with *Laudato Si*’,” 14.

²³⁹ Francis, *Querida Amazonia*, 54.

²⁴⁰ Scheid, “*Laudato si*’ and the development of Catholic Social Teaching,” 188.

²⁴¹ Vogt, “*Laudato Si*’: Social Analysis and Political Engagement,” 18.

only human beings are like God in that they too are able of knowledge and understanding.”²⁴² Unfortunately, in the Western world, some people tend to express their concern about the rights of pets or nature more than the rights of poor people living in their countries. Francis asserts, “Concern for the environment ... needs to be joined to a sincere love for the fellow human beings and an unwavering commitment to resolving the problems of society.”²⁴³

In short integral ecology helps us to understand that interdependence extends far beyond humanity; the “all” for which human beings are responsible is planetary. That is, the principle of integral ecology leads to the ecological common good which entails care for God’s creation. However, God’s creation is not limited to the earth and present generation. It also includes future generations.

Common Good and Future Generations

Like John Paul II, Francis linked the notion of common good to the principle of intergenerational solidarity. He writes, “The notion of the common good also extends to future generations.”²⁴⁴ The Pope’s exhortation does not limit our gaze to the present generation. He also claims that the future is relevant. This truth is expressed in the 2030 agenda for sustainable development of the United Nations as one of the priorities: “We are determined to protect the planet from degradation (...) so that it can support the needs of the present and future generations.”²⁴⁵ In fact, we cannot use the natural resources as if we were the last generation to exist on earth. Creation existed before us and should exist after

²⁴² Clark, “Development as Freedom Together,” 6.

²⁴³ Francis, *Laudato Si*’, 91.

²⁴⁴ Francis, *Laudato Si*’, 159.

²⁴⁵ United Nations, *Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. 2015. Note that this document was issue the same year and after the publication of *Laudato si*’.

us. In other words, by overexploiting the earth, we compromise not only the quality of life of the present generation, but also of future generations. For instance, according to the fourth Assessment of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), “If nothing is done to stabilize the level of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, especially carbon dioxide, between 1.1 and 3.2 [future generations] will face water shortage by 2080.”²⁴⁶ On her commentary on *Laudato si'*, Christiana Zenner notes that the ecological concern for future generation was already present in John Paul II’s thought. She writes, “John Paul II stipulated themes of interconnectedness and responsibilities to future generations.”²⁴⁷ In the same direction, Francis wants to remind us that we should not be concerned only about our own needs but also those of future generations. Francis stated, “Once we start to think about the kind of world we are leaving to future generations, we look at things differently; we realize that the world is a gift which we have freely received and must share with others.”²⁴⁸ During the online meeting that Francis held with African students on November 1, 2022, he mentioned that we don’t have the right to leave an unhealthy environment to future generations.²⁴⁹ We have the responsibility of caring for the earth, our common home.

Ngolele, S.J., notes that the concern for the good of future generations is also characteristic of African spirituality. In the context of African culture, the human community is not only the living. The unborn (future generations) as well as the deceased

²⁴⁶ Sean McDonagh, *On Care for Our Common Home*, 27.

²⁴⁷ Zenner, “Commentary on *Laudato si'*,” 520.

²⁴⁸ Francis, *Laudato Si*, 159.

²⁴⁹ Building Bridges across Africa: A Synodal Encounter between Pope Francis and University Students. Youtube video. 1.46:44, November 1st, 2022. https://youtu.be/TPa6i_ZJJDk

(past generations) count as part of the human community.²⁵⁰ So, building the common good of the community includes necessarily future generations.

For believers, if one recognizes that the earth does not belong to us, that the world is indeed a gift received from God, then the protection of creation is not a favor that we bestow on future generations but arises from the necessity of justice between generations. Francis asserts, “intergenerational solidarity is not optional, but rather a basic question of justice, since the world we have received also belongs to those who will follow us.”²⁵¹

While intergenerational solidarity is important, Pope Francis reminds us that this should not be an excuse for ignoring the needs of the poor of our time who cannot wait and who sometimes die prematurely because of our indifference towards them. The Pontiff says, “Let us not only keep the poor of the future in mind, but also today’s poor, whose life on this earth is brief and who cannot keep on waiting.”²⁵² For Francis, “Inter and intragenerational solidarity are both essential.”²⁵³ Integral ecology promoted by Francis entails the preferential option for the poor.

Integral Ecology Entails a Preferential Option for the Poor

Pope Francis, speaking of environmental degradation, argues that the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor are linked.²⁵⁴ Indeed, “As the earth cries out, there are multitudes of poor men and women who are especially affected by the damage to the planet.”²⁵⁵ Alexandre A. Martins writes, “Francis uses the approach of integral ecology,

²⁵⁰Ngolele, “African Wisdom in Dialogue with *Laudato Si*,” 9.

²⁵¹ Francis, *Laudato Si*, 159.

²⁵² Francis, *Laudato Si*, 159.

²⁵³ Zenner, “Commentary on *Laudato si*,” 518.

²⁵⁴ Francis, *Laudato Si*, 49.

²⁵⁵ Uwimeza, “African Spirituality and Its Contribution to the Ecological Crisis,” n.p.

connecting environmental concerns and the poor who are the first and foremost victims of current paradigm of exploitation of the earth.”²⁵⁶ In other words, while the ecological crisis poses a threat for all humanity, the poor are the most vulnerable to it. In fact, the way of “seeing” what is happening to our common home by Francis is not neutral. Vogt reminds us that “Observations and analyses are always rooted in a particular point of view.”²⁵⁷ Francis chooses to observe the world with the perspective of the poor or, more specifically, with a particular attention to the principle of preferential option for the poor. “This principle calls upon everyone to prioritize the perspective of people who lack privilege and power – those who live on the margins of society.”²⁵⁸ Scheid goes in the same direction when he writes, “the ‘preferential option for the poor’ argues that utmost concern must be shown to those in the greatest need.”²⁵⁹ If the Roman Catholic Church calls people to exercise particular concern for the poor, it is because they are most vulnerable to injustices that undermine their human dignity.²⁶⁰ The particular concern for the poor that Francis expresses is not a surprise for who know that this principle emerged for the first time in the geographical area where he came from. Scheid says, “The exact phrase ‘POP’ [preferential option for the poor] was used first by the bishops’ conference of Latin America in 1979. The bishops in these countries observed with distress the sharp and extreme gap between the rich and the poor that was hindering the Church’s ministry to their people.”²⁶¹

²⁵⁶ Alexandre A. Martins, “*Laudato Si*’: Integral ecology and the preferential option for the poor.” *Journal of Religious Ethics*, 46, n.3 (September 2018): 412.

²⁵⁷ Vogt, “*Laudato Si*’: Social Analysis and Political Engagement,” 15.

²⁵⁸ Vogt, “*Laudato Si*’: Social Analysis and Political Engagement,” 15-16.

²⁵⁹ Scheid, *The Cosmic Common Good: Religious Grounds for Ecological Ethics*, 83.

²⁶⁰ Scheid, “*Laudato si*’ and the Development of Catholic Social Teaching,” 188.

²⁶¹ Scheid, *The Cosmic Common Good: Religious Grounds for Ecological Ethics*, 83.

At the beginning of his pontificate, Francis said that he wanted a poor Church for the poor. With this statement and others like it, he was associated, in the thoughts of many people, with liberation theology, a theological movement which gives particular attention to the poor. Whatever opinion one holds on this current pope, it can be said that in *Laudato si'*, “Francis insists on the centrality of the poor.”²⁶² Martins asserts, “Francis places the poor at the center of ecclesial *raison d'être* and ministry.”²⁶³ In other words, he has helped to put concern for the poor at the center of the Church’s pastoral work in the world.

Environmental degradation threatens the survival of the poor and sometimes forces them to become migrants in search of safety. Miller recognizes this truth, writing, “The poor are the greatest victims of climate change...when their ecologies are disrupted, their livelihoods collapse, and they are forced to become migrants.”²⁶⁴ Uwimeza goes further when he asserts, “When nature fights back against human exploitation; it is the less fortunate, those without the means to afford suitable housing, healthcare, education, security, etc., who bear the consequences.”²⁶⁵ Besides, the ecological crisis is perceptible through the waste of resources which is an insult to the dignity of the poor. While some households throw away food, many people around the world die of starvation every day. Francis says, “When we fail to acknowledge as part of reality the worth of a poor person ... it becomes difficult to hear the cry of nature itself; everything is connected.”²⁶⁶ Integral ecology reminds us that respect for the environment and the preferential option for the poor are inseparable.²⁶⁷ For the Pontiff, “every ecological approach needs to incorporate a social

²⁶² Scheid, “*Laudato si'* and the Development of Catholic Social Teaching,” 189.

²⁶³ Martins, “*Laudato Si'*: Integral ecology,” 414.

²⁶⁴ Miller, “Integral ecology,” 19.

²⁶⁵ Uwimeza, “African Spirituality,” n.p.

²⁶⁶ Francis, *Laudato Si'*, 117.

²⁶⁷ Miller, “Integral ecology,” 19.

perspective which takes into account the fundamental rights of the poor and underprivileged.”²⁶⁸

The preferential option for the poor enhances solidarity which promotes the moral vision of the common good. Francis expressed the link between these three principles of CST in this way, “the principle of the common good immediately becomes, logically and inevitably, a summons to solidarity and a preferential option for the poorest of our brothers and sisters.”

Francis invites us to stand in solidarity with the poorest in our societies in order to promote and protect the common good in the midst of environmental degradation. Indeed, the preferential option for the poor is an expression of solidarity.²⁶⁹ As noted earlier in chapter 1, the realization of the common good is concerned with the fulfillment of all and everyone including the poor. The fundamental option in favor of the poorest must be reflected in our social life and our political commitment. We are called “to speak for the voiceless, to defend the defenseless, to assess lifestyles, policies, and social institutions in terms of their impact on the poor.”²⁷⁰ It should be noted that the preferential option for the poor does not mean that God is against the rich. Daniel Scheid writes, “[the preferential option for the poor] certainly does not indicate that the rich are less loved by God or that their interests should be sacrificed in order to benefit the poor.”²⁷¹ This would be counterproductive for seeking the common good. Indeed, God loves everyone. But “The Church has made an option for the poor which is understood as a special form of primacy

²⁶⁸ Francis, *Laudato Si*, 93.

²⁶⁹ Scheid, *The Cosmic Common Good: Religious Grounds for Ecological Ethics*, 83.

²⁷⁰ US Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Economic Justice for All: Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy*, 1986, 16.

²⁷¹ Scheid, *The Cosmic Common Good: Religious Grounds for Ecological Ethics*, 83.

in the exercise to Christian charity.”²⁷² The preferential love for the poor flows from the universality of the love of God. God loves all people, but the poor occupy the first place in this love.

If the poorest must receive the priority of consideration in any community, it is because they represent the test case for determining how well a community is actually working to promote the common good.²⁷³ Martins notes, “In LS, Francis expands the force of the option for the poor by connecting it to the principle of the common good ... In this connection he presents the preferential option for the poor as an ‘ethical imperative’ to promote participation in the common good.”²⁷⁴ The preferential option for the poor strives to enable the marginalized to have a full and equal participation in the common good. Scheid writes, “[the preferential option for the poor] recognizes the poor not as passive recipients of aid but as agents whose active contributions to the common good must be supported and enhanced.”²⁷⁵

While the preferential option for the poor is the Christian commitment to include in the common good those who are oppressed and marginalized, in LS, Francis “introduces a new category of the poor and vulnerable: the earth itself.”²⁷⁶ Martins observes, “The earth and the poor are so connected that Francis even opens his encyclical placing the earth among ‘the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor.’”²⁷⁷ If the earth itself is poor, it is because of her overexploitation by human activities. This affects the products of the earth and compromises the chance of the poor to get food -- as we will see in the next chapter in

²⁷² Martins, “*Laudato Si*’: Integral ecology,” 417.

²⁷³ Scheid, *The Cosmic Common Good: Religious Grounds for Ecological Ethics*, 84.

²⁷⁴ Martins, “*Laudato Si*’: Integral ecology,” 414.

²⁷⁵ Scheid, *The Cosmic Common Good: Religious Grounds for Ecological Ethics*, 84.

²⁷⁶ Scheid, “*Laudato si*’ and the Development of Catholic Social Teaching,” 189.

²⁷⁷ Martins, “*Laudato Si*’: Integral ecology,” 417.

a practical case related to deforestation in Cameroon. To be in solidarity with the poor, means to respect the rights of the poor, but also the rights of the earth. For, “the earth is also a poor, one who needs to be cared for along with those vulnerable humans who are the first to suffer the consequence of an exploitative paradigm of the earth.”²⁷⁸

In sum, integral ecology as moral principle not only expands solidarity and the common good, but also broadens our understanding of the preferential option for the poor by including our mother earth who is also oppressed as the same way as some of our brothers and sisters.²⁷⁹ In the line with Benedict, Francis demonstrates that the way we treat our earth influences the way we treat the poor: the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor come together.²⁸⁰ One could even say: Tell me how you treat the earth, and I will tell you how much consideration you have for the poor. Ultimately, instead of the current paradigm of exploitation of the earth, a new paradigm based on care for our common home needs to be developed.²⁸¹

Commitment to the Common Good Requires Care for Creation

Catholic social teaching for several decades has invited the community to reject the reign of anthropocentrism and to embrace an integral ecological approach. Vogt observed,

Initially, Catholic social teaching focused exclusively on human concerns without considering the implications of human choices for the rest of creation. It was concerned with how people should work together to build societies that protect the well-being and dignity of all humans. These concerns remain its primary focus, but it has increasingly come to recognize that the good of humanity cannot be separated from the good of the planet as a whole.²⁸²

²⁷⁸ Francis, *Laudato Si*, 190.

²⁷⁹ Francis, *Laudato Si*, 2.

²⁸⁰ Francis, *Laudato Si*, 49.

²⁸¹ Martins, “*Laudato Si*’: Integral ecology,” 416.

²⁸² Vogt, “Catholic Social Teaching,” 223.

In fact, there is an increasing awareness of the interdependence of humans with their ecosystem. By destroying their environment, humans destroy themselves. Certain natural disasters are sometimes the consequence of the ecological violence that human beings carry out on the planet. So, “it is a practical and moral imperative that humankind develop a renewed understanding of economic and human development that is cognizant of the relationship between humans and the rest of creation.”²⁸³

As noted earlier, though the invitation to take care of creation as an ethical imperative was already present in the tradition of Catholic social teaching,²⁸⁴ it is indisputable that under the current magisterium of Pope Francis this teaching has developed further and become more systematic. Human beings have a duty to take care of creation. The earth is our common home. However, the earth is crying out because of our irresponsible use of the goods of creation.²⁸⁵ This situation “has called attention to the poor as more likely than other people to suffer the effects of environmental degradation.”²⁸⁶ To save the earth, our common home, we need a common response of care for creation. This can only take place if people realize that they are not the owners of creation but stewards. Unfortunately, many development projects sometimes ignore the ecological dimension. As we will see in the last chapter, in Cameroon (a country in Central Africa), the phenomenon of deforestation confirms this observation of the lack of care for creation.

As believers we are called to protect both people and non-human creatures. For Francis, God wants us to take care not only of our brothers and sisters but also of the natural

²⁸³ Vogt, “Catholic Social Teaching,” 223.

²⁸⁴ Francis/McDonagh, Sean *On Care for Our Common Home, Laudato Si': The Encyclical of Pope Francis on the Environment*, 5.

²⁸⁵ Francis, *Laudato Si*, 2.

²⁸⁶ Vogt, “Catholic Social Teaching,” 231.

environment.²⁸⁷ That is keeping our faith in sync with all of God’s creation. In fact, God created human beings to live in communion with God, their fellow human beings, and the natural world. However, with the fall of the first couple came a disconnect for humanity in fulfilling his/her mission to cultivate and care for the earth (Gen 2:15). Francis writes, “According to the biblical account of creation, God placed man and woman in the garden he had created (cf. Gen 2:15) not only to preserve it (‘keep’) but also to make it fruitful (‘till’).”²⁸⁸ According to Castillo, when God asks humankind to subdue the earth and dominate it, these verbs are to be understood not in the negative sense of destruction, but rather in the positive sense of being responsible for the earth and taking care of it.²⁸⁹ It is about serving the earth in the model of the good shepherd who takes care of his sheep. God is a being of peace who did not use violence to create. So, the human person's mission is to maintain peaceful relationships with other created entities. Francis says, “we are called to recognize that other living beings have a value of their own in God’s eye.”²⁹⁰

In addition, “[E]very individual and every society has an obligation to promote and protect the vibrant health of the natural environment. The responsibility stems from the human duty to protect and build up the common good.”²⁹¹ One cannot promote the common good if s/he does not care for creation. As Vogt reminds us, “a safe and healthy natural environment is an important component of the common good. Every person has a right to

²⁸⁷ Francis, *Querida Amazonia* 41.

²⁸⁸ Francis, *Laudato Si*, 124.

²⁸⁹ Daniel P. Castillo, *An Ecological Theology of Liberation: Salvation and Political Ecology*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2019): 74-75.

²⁹⁰ Francis, *Laudato Si*, 69.

²⁹¹ Vogt, “Catholic Social Teaching,” 226.

live in a place in which the environment has not been degraded, in which people are not exposed to dangerous toxins, in which clean water is readily available.”²⁹²

The Common Good and the Need for International Regulation

As noted in the first chapter, in every country, political authority exists to ensure the well-being of its population without exception.²⁹³ Like John Paul II, Francis maintains that the state has the obligation to defend and promote the common good.²⁹⁴ However, the political authorities of a country have the right and the duty to secure the common good of their fellow citizens, but they cannot do so without taking into account the common good of humanity. The promotion and protection of the common good is not only about the goods of a particular community or country, but also redounds to the goods shared by the whole planet. In fact, in addition to goods that belong to individuals or to particular communities, there are also some goods that belong to all humanity “such as the atmosphere, the forests, the global water cycle, and the oceans.”²⁹⁵ This last category of goods is called the “global commons.”²⁹⁶ “They are essentially shared.”²⁹⁷ In other words, no community can claim to have more right to the global commons than others. In fact, these goods are part of the common heritage of humankind. Since it is difficult and even impossible to exclude people from using the global commons, they “should be protected by an appropriate system of governance”²⁹⁸ for the benefit of all. This kind of governance

²⁹² Vogt, “Catholic Social Teaching,” 225-226.

²⁹³ Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 168.

²⁹⁴ Francis, *Laudato Si*, 157.

²⁹⁵ Ottmar Edenhofer and Christian Flachsland, “*Laudato Si*’: Concern for our Global Commons,” in *The Theological and Ecological Vision of Laudato si’: Everything is connected*, edited by Vincent J. Miller (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017): 177.

²⁹⁶ Francis, *Laudato Si*, 174.

²⁹⁷ Edenhofer and Flachsland, “Concern for our Global Commons,” 181.

²⁹⁸ Edenhofer and Flachsland, “Concern for our Global Commons,” 180.

must take into account the universal destination of goods and the preferential option for the poor that we discussed earlier.

The principle of the universal destination of goods maintains that the goods of creation belong to all and everyone. Pope Francis argues, “Whether believers or not, we are agreed today that the earth is essentially a shared inheritance, whose fruits are meant to benefit everyone...God created the world for everyone.”²⁹⁹ In the management of global commons, it is important to ensure that the poor are not excluded. In a global context, people from North should be concerned about the impact of their industrialization process on people from South. Who pays the price of the rapid economic growth of some Western countries?

Since the atmosphere is shared with the entire global community, we should impose a tax on industrialized nations which pollute it more, not only to protect climate but to restore justice in favor of the poor, who are most affected by the ecological crisis.³⁰⁰ Scheid goes further when he writes, “Developed nations are indeed indebted to developing nations. The North has taken more than its share of environmental climatic space, and so owes the South some compensation for the unjust harm that its people now experience.”³⁰¹ For this theologian, the ecological debt of the countries of the North vis-à-vis the countries of the South is not a favor granted to the latter, but a demand for justice that cannot be neglected. Indeed, if the countries of the South have polluted the environment in the same proportions as the countries of the North, climate change would undoubtedly be more a threat to the survival of humanity on earth. “The south should be compensated for not destroying as the

²⁹⁹ Francis, *Laudato Si*, 93.

³⁰⁰ Francis, *Laudato Si*, 46.

³⁰¹ Scheid, “*Laudato si*’ and the Development of Catholic Social Teaching,” 190.

North has done, ecosystems that the earth now desperately needs to preserve.”³⁰² However, that compensation cannot happen if the countries of the North do not move their understanding of the common good from the national level to the global level as suggested in *Pacem in Terris* by Pope John XXIII.³⁰³ Francis rightly observes, “An interdependent world not only makes us more conscious of the negative effects of certain lifestyles and models of production and consumption which affect us all; more importantly, it motivates us to ensure that solutions are proposed from a global perspective ... Interdependence obliges us to think of one world with a common plan.”³⁰⁴ If we are one human family or a global village as some have argued, we need an international organization to protect and promote our common good. Without such an institution, rich countries endowed with powerful technological means will continue to enrich themselves by exploiting natural resources that belong to the whole planet, without considering the plight of developing countries.³⁰⁵ In fact, “The present lack of regulation of carbon emissions serves the interests of powerful wealthy nations at the expense of poor nations.”³⁰⁶ The experts add: “The revenue from CO2 pricing could be used to provide the poorest with access to basic goods.”³⁰⁷ In admitting that there are global common concerns, we should be led to recognize the need for international regulations for a better management of them. Global common concerns effectively belong to the common good. “The oceans and the whole range of so-called ‘global commons’ should be protected by an appropriate system of governance.”³⁰⁸ This system should always take into account the most vulnerable of our

³⁰² Scheid, “*Laudato si’* and the Development of Catholic Social Teaching,” 190.

³⁰³ John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*, n. 98-100 and 132-37.

³⁰⁴ Francis, *Laudato Si*, 164.

³⁰⁵ Francis, *Querida Amazonia*, 52.

³⁰⁶ Edenhofer and Flachslund, “Concern for our Global Commons,” 180.

³⁰⁷ Edenhofer and Flachslund, “Concern for our Global Commons,” 183.

³⁰⁸ Edenhofer and Flachslund, “Concern for our Global Commons,” 180.

societies and exercise the preferential option for the poor. It is not enough to listen to the cry of the poor, but we should make an option for them, since “God himself embraces the poor first and foremost, and unreservedly.”³⁰⁹

Conclusion

In conclusion, let us acknowledge that “Integral ecology is the central theme of *Laudato Si*’. It is a transformative way of seeing that opens up to the interconnections with the rest of creation that sustains us.”³¹⁰ While John Paul II observes that peoples and nations are increasingly interconnected and interdependent around the world, Francis stresses that “everything is interconnected.”³¹¹ For the latter, “What happens to the ecosystem affects everything else.”³¹² As we have seen, with integral ecology, Francis expands our understanding of the common good beyond humanity to the ecological common good which entails care for God’s creation. Francis demonstrates that the contemporary ecological crisis is the consequence of a tyrannical anthropocentrism in which human being have considered themselves to be masters of nature.³¹³ To save our mother earth, we need a common response that is care for creation. Ultimately, Francis wants us “to respect, cherish, and stop exploiting planet earth”³¹⁴ for the benefit of all humanity – especially the poor most affected by the environmental degradation – and future generations.

³⁰⁹ Huot, “The Common Good tested against the Option for the Poor,” 205.

³¹⁰ Miller, “Integral ecology,” 21.

³¹¹ Francis, *Laudato Si*, 70.

³¹² Ngolele, “African Wisdom in Dialogue with *Laudato Si*’,” 10.

³¹³ Miller, “Integral ecology,” 16.

³¹⁴ Francis/McDonagh, Sean *On Care for Our Common Home, Laudato Si’: The Encyclical of Pope Francis on the Environment*, xiii.

Chapter 3: Deforestation in Cameroon: An Ethical Analysis in Light of CST

Introduction

In Chapter 1, I defined and explained the principle of the common good as understood in Catholic social teaching through John Paul II. I also presented its link with solidarity in the social vision of John Paul II. Solidarity is a corollary to the common good that is the good of each of us and the whole society.³¹⁵ In chapter 2, we have seen how Francis extends the notion of the common good with the perspective of integral ecology: ecological common good. Francis made a significant change by expanding the concept of common good beyond the human good to an integral ecology. Building the common good involves care for creation that embraces human and non-human creatures. For Francis, ecological devastation affects all humanity but more especially the poor. He describes the preferential option for the poor “as an ethical imperative essential for effectively attaining the common good.”³¹⁶ This last chapter aims to illustrate, in a practical case, the relevance of the expansion of the principle of the common good in Catholic social teaching by Pope Francis in the life of poor rural communities affected by deforestation in Cameroon. I argue that the promotion of the common good in Cameroon requires our commitment to work assiduously to protect the Basin Congo Forest. Indeed, we live in a time of ecological crisis. Pope Francis remarks, “the earth, our home, is beginning to look more and more like an immense pile of filth.”³¹⁷ One example of environmental degradation is the phenomenon of deforestation in Cameroon. Yet, “Forests are valuable environmental and economic resources, which support natural systems and play an important role in the economic

³¹⁵ Rowlands, *Towards a Politics of Communion: Catholic Social Teaching in Dark Times*, 257.

³¹⁶ Francis, *Laudato Si*, 158.

³¹⁷ Francis, *Laudato Si*, 21.

welfare of human societies.”³¹⁸ I will show that solidarity with the rural poor most affected by deforestation in Cameroon, requires engagement to care for the forests which are part of the common good. Integral ecology –the central theme of *Laudato Si’* – expands the common good to include the good of all creation because everything is connected.³¹⁹

The Problem of Deforestation in Cameroon

Before describing what is happening to Congo Basin, our common home, through deforestation in Cameroon, it seems important to introduce briefly our place of study and mention the importance of forests in the economy of this country. As we will see later in this chapter, deforestation affects Cameroonian economy and creates more poverty especially in the rural areas.

Presentation of Cameroon

Cameroon is a country of Central Africa with an estimated population of around 27 million inhabitants³²⁰ covering an area of 475,442 km². Due to its dual colonial heritage (France and Great Britain), Cameroon stands out from other African countries by its bilingualism. Indeed, as Canada, Cameroon has two official languages: French and English. The country has 10 regions, two of which are mainly English-speaking and eight French-speaking. The main cities in Cameroon are Yaounde, Douala, Bafoussam, Limbe, Nkongsamba, Garoua and Maroua. One of the peculiarities of Cameroon is its great cultural diversity. There are over 250 local languages and a geographic landscape that vary from

³¹⁸Daniel Gbetnkom, “Forest Depletion and Food Security of Poor Rural Populations in Africa: Evidence from Cameroon,” n.p. *Journal of African Economies*, 18, no 2 (March 2009).

³¹⁹ Miller, “Integral ecology,” 11, 20.

³²⁰ The World bank data, (2021).

region to region. Because of this diversity, Cameroon is generally called Africa in miniature.

Cameroon's economy is the most diversified in Central Africa, thanks to numerous foreign establishments and national groups. There are very varied activities in the country, particularly in the forestry and agricultural sectors (cash and food crops), hydrocarbons, the beverage industry, sugar mills, oil mills, soap factories, flour mills, aluminum, cement, metallurgy, first wood processing, etc. In the early 1980s, Cameroon was among the most economically successful African countries thanks to the product of its forests and hydrocarbon. Indeed, from 1965 to 1985 there were two decades of steady growth; the Cameroonian economy recorded real growth rates of around 7%. The following years were marked by a severe recession. One of the causes was the fall of coffee, cocoa and oil prices, which led to a deterioration in the terms of trade. With the economic crisis of 1985 and the devaluation of its currency in 1994, the government undertook economic recovery measures and carried out, with the support of donors, stabilization, and structural adjustment programs.³²¹ Cameroon has embarked on a policy aimed at reducing its dependence on the hydrocarbon sector as part of a strategy to diversify its economy, which is currently dominated by oil. The objective of this policy is to ensure that the country becomes an emerging economy by 2035.

In addition to significant forest resources, Cameroon has very profitable deposits of bauxite in the North of the country. Natural gas reserves and oil deposits are exploited on the high seas in Douala. Gold is mined in small quantities, as are tin ore and limestone.

³²¹ Cameroon, National Development Strategy 2020-2030: For Structural Transformation and Inclusive Development, 20.

The hydrographic network offers considerable hydroelectric potential used in metallurgical facilities in Edea city. The Cameroonian Forest is one of the largest in Africa. There are rare and precious essences in that forest. The country is crossed by several large rivers on which power stations have been built. To cope with the very high current demand, the country has begun the construction of new natural gas thermal power stations: Kribi and Limbe.

Statistics and Facts about Deforestation in Cameroon

The Congo Basin Forest in Central Africa is the second largest tropical forest in the world after the Amazon rainforest.³²² It covers nearly 200 million ha (hectare) in size and is shared among six countries: Cameroon, Central African Republic, Republic of Congo, Democratic Republic of Congo, Gabon and Equatorial Guinea.³²³ Cameroon contains 10% of the Congo Basin Forest.³²⁴ The people of Cameroon are often defined as a people of the forest. The Forest is one of the most important natural resources in Cameroon.³²⁵ Some inhabitants of the southern region of this country, in particular the pygmies, still live in harmony with the forest depending mainly on hunting and gathering. However, due to increasing deforestation, Cameroon has already lost a good part of its forest. Gbetnkoum acknowledges this fact, “In Cameroon, about 18 million hectares of its original forestland has been cleared down for agriculture and settlement, with nearly two million hectares alone lost between the periods 1980 and 1995 [...] Cameroon has thus lost almost half of

³²² Léocadie Wabo Lushombo, “Deforestation in the Democratic Republic of Congo and climate change: An ethical analysis in light of *Laudato Si*,” *Asian Horizons*, 9, no. 4 (December 2015): 726.

³²³ Lushombo, “Deforestation in the Democratic Republic of Congo and climate change,” 730.

³²⁴ Precillia Tata Ngome et al., “Assessing Household Food Insecurity Experience in the Context of Deforestation in Cameroon,” *Food Policy*, 84 (2019): 57.

³²⁵ Fonjong, “Managing Deforestation,” n.p.

its historic forest.”³²⁶ According to some experts, every year, Cameroon loses around 200,000 hectares of its forest. “Cameroon ranks as the country with the second highest annual deforestation rate in the Congo Basin”³²⁷. The situation is critical and has some impact on climate change.

Deforestation is one of the factors contributing to climate change in Cameroon. Lushombo notes, “How forests are managed has a real impact on the amount of CO2 emitted into the atmosphere and therefore on the greenhouse effect ... [Forests] should not be cut down without any strategy for replacing them.”³²⁸ Indeed, for several decades, the global climate has been undergoing major changes. Cameroon is no less affected by this situation. We are witnessing in this country disturbances in the division of the seasons. Twenty-five years ago, when I was a teenager, it was easier in my village to predict harvests from the calendar of the seasons. However, nowadays, that is no longer the case. The periods of classic successions dry seasons / rainy seasons are completely turned upside down. Climate change is visible in Cameroon through the increasing annual average temperature but also the reduction of rainfall³²⁹. For instance, in North Cameroon there is a significant drop in rainfall which causes migratory flows of populations.³³⁰

While the deforestation of the Congo Basin impacts the climate change in Central Africa in general and Cameroon in particular, it also impacts climate change in other geographical areas of the planet, far from the African continent. Some scientists confirm

³²⁶ Gbetnkom, “Forest Depletion,” n.p.

³²⁷ Fonjong, “Managing Deforestation,” n.p.

³²⁸ Lushombo, “Deforestation in the Democratic Republic of Congo and climate change,” 730.

³²⁹ Cameroon, National Development Strategy 2020-2030: For Structural Transformation and Inclusive Development, 227.

³³⁰ UNHCR, « La baisse de la pluviométrie dans le Nord du Cameroun provoque conflit et déplacements de population,» (10 Nov. 2021), <https://www.google.com/url?>

this when they write, “Deforestation of Central Africa causes a decrease of precipitation of about 5%-15% in the Great Lakes region [in the United States], mostly centered in Illinois with a peak decrease of about 35% in February. It also affects Ukraine and Russia (North of the Black Sea), where precipitation there is reduced by as much as 25% in May.”³³¹ This observation clearly shows that the Congo Basin is part of the common good of all humanity. As Francis reminds us: “everything is connected.”³³²

Note that the increase of temperatures in Cameroon is noticeable in certain cities such as Douala and Yaounde. This increase in temperature is responsible for the disappearance of certain herbs which are useful for the care of the indigenous populations living around the forest. These populations generally resort to traditional pharmacopoeia for treatment. Deforestation therefore makes them more dependent on Western medicine.

Deforestation is also accompanied by the high risk of food insecurity. “Pope Francis acknowledges that forests ... are a means for subsistence for poor people.”³³³ However, women are the most harmed because they get supplies in the forests to feed their children. “[They] are often more reliant than men on forest products, obtaining from them income needed to feed and clothe the family, as well as fuel for cooking.”³³⁴ Note that the suffering of these women is unfortunately accentuated by male domination. Lushombo confirms this when she writes, “In rural Africa, despite women’s economic contribution in households through agricultural work and commercialization of products from the forests, their access to land is generally limited and under the control of men ... women are still counted among

³³¹ Roni Avissar and David Werth, “Global Hydroclimatological Teleconnections Resulting from Tropical Deforestation,” *Journal of Hydrometeorology* 6 (April 2015): 140-141.

³³² Francis, *Laudato si'*, 91.

³³³ Lushombo, “Deforestation in the Democratic Republic of Congo and climate change,” 727.

³³⁴ Daniel Gbetnkom, “Forest Depletion,” n.p.

the excluded in decision-making concerning the management of forests.”³³⁵ The cry of a poor Cameroonian woman is quite representative of the suffering and the uncertain future of rural women. She said,

Our forests change from one day to the next. What future awaits our children? The settlements destroy the forest, and the felling of trees prevents us from gathering honey to feed our children. The noise of their huge machines is causing the animals to flee far away. The trees falling into the rivers obstruct the riverbeds. Some fruits are becoming scarce, and we have to walk for a long time to find them. And the mushrooms we used to gather everywhere are gone. ... our children have no future. Where will they find animals to hunt? The bark, the leaves and the fruits for curing and eating?³³⁶

Most of the poor in Cameroon, as in other Central African countries, are women.³³⁷ They are closely dependent on forest activities for their survival and that of their families, hence their concern about increasing deforestation. “Although poverty is a national problem in Cameroon, its impact is heavily felt by those within the lower social strata, notably women.”³³⁸

Causes of Deforestation in Cameroon

The causes of accelerated deforestation of Basin Congo in Cameroon are multiple. This section provides an overview of these causes and their relative importance. By presenting these causes, I will use Catholic social teaching as a tool to analyze them.

Foreign Companies

Forest degradation in Cameroon is accentuated by the logic of the market economy driven by profit maximization without taking into account the environmental

³³⁵ Lushombo, “Deforestation in the Democratic Republic of Congo and climate change,” 738.

³³⁶ Fonjong, “Managing Deforestation,” n.p.

³³⁷ Gbetnkom, “Forest Depletion,” n.p.

³³⁸ Fonjong, “Managing Deforestation,” n.p.

consequences. The foreign companies often operate in violation of forest regulations but go unpunished due to corruption or influence peddling by government authorities. Fonjong wrote,

Industrial logging in Cameroon remains the monopoly of foreign companies led by the French... the French companies alone held more than 50% of forest concessions, besides other forest related assets. Most commercial exploitation occurs outside the legal framework provided for by the 1994 forest law that ought to regulate the abusive rate of deforestation and promote reforestation. The illegal exploitation and other malpractices account for the majority of the logging. Public officials sometimes disrupt the course of justice and enable defaulters of forest regulation to go unpunished.³³⁹

Francis observes that in the logic of the market, what counts is immediate profit without any consideration of the ecological impacts.³⁴⁰ Indeed, several foreign companies, many from France exploit the forest of Cameroon. Since Cameroon is on the Atlantic Ocean, it is easier for these companies to export forest products.

People who grew up in the port city of Douala in Cameroon (Central Africa), as I did, have witnessed first-hand the problem of deforestation of the Congo Basin. In fact, when I was a teenager, I saw a hundred trucks carrying wood to the port of Douala for export to industrialized countries, almost every day. This practice has not stopped and is not unique to Cameroon. A Congolese theologian, Lushombo Leocardie, confirms this when she wrote,

as a citizen of the DRC [Democratic Republic of Congo], considering how many trucks continue to carry trees out of the forests' areas for exportation, I have always been concerned by the collective poverty of so many people living around the forests ... Timber in the DRC is overpriced for the majority of the population who cannot afford wood products which are enjoyed by many other countries³⁴¹

³³⁹ Fonjong, "Managing Deforestation," n.p.

³⁴⁰ Francis, *Laudato Si'*, 55,56.

³⁴¹ Lushombo, "Deforestation in the Democratic Republic of Congo and climate change," 728.

This situation is similar in the Amazon where timber traders are destroying the forest considerably.³⁴² Yet, Francis recalls that the forest is the mother of indigenous populations. It allows them not only to eat, but also to heal themselves.³⁴³

Deforestation is a visible phenomenon in Cameroon. And yet, in Cameroon, the forest plays an important role in the lives of both rural and urban populations, especially the poor. The economic activity of the poor is essentially organized around the forest. It is thanks to the products of the forest that they feed themselves and trade in order to have a little money.

Radical Wealth Inequality

The Cameroonian bourgeois minority participate significantly in deforestation. In Cameroon, as is the case in the Amazon, a minority of the wealthy plunder the natural resources of the forest without scruple, without caring about the vast majority of the poor.³⁴⁴ It is enough to walk in the big cities of Douala and Yaounde to see that they are owners of large spaces in which they have built big houses. These houses are generally less intended to shelter their families than to demonstrate their financial power. Sometimes one could wonder how a family of 5 can afford several hectares as a place to live. By doing so, the rich people reduce the amount of cultivable land and penalize the poor populations who depend essentially on the availability of this land for living. The economist Fonjong recognizes this truth. He says, “The rich minority controlling the wealth of the nation are also agents of deforestation. The transformation of the natural outskirts of large cities like Yaoundé, Douala and Bamenda, for example, through the construction of big villas and

³⁴² Francis, *Querida Amazonia*, 11.

³⁴³ Francis, *Querida Amazonia*, 13.

³⁴⁴ Francis, *Querida Amazonia*, 16.

mansions, has reduced to a significant level, the amount of forest in these localities.”³⁴⁵ And when the forest is destroyed, it is no longer able to feed us like a mother, and the main sufferers are the poor.³⁴⁶ In fact, the poor are always the most vulnerable to the environmental degradation. “Generally, the poorest households have the highest degree of reliance on forest products for income and food.”³⁴⁷

From a theological point of view, the Cameroon’s case of deforestation could be considered as a typical example of how social sin plays into deforestation. Some Cameroonians use their financial power selfishly. They act as if the earth of the country belongs to them alone. They only care about their individual good without considering the common good of society. Lushombo rightly asserts, “The economic systems are controlled by the most powerful excluding the powerless from the benefit of the resources which belong to all.”³⁴⁸

Economic Poverty and Education Deficit

Economic poverty is one of the main drivers of deforestation in Cameroon. For poor people, the forest seems to be the only space where it is possible to get supplies. To get currency to meet other needs such as access to healthcare or sending children to school, people living in poverty are forced to trade in products derived from the forest. In other words, “Forestry is the only means of survival for this group.”³⁴⁹ A prominent example is charcoal. This is obtained from the wood they burn. The coal is used in most households both in towns and in villages. In fact, very few households in Cameroon have the possibility

³⁴⁵ Fonjong, “Managing Deforestation,” n.p.

³⁴⁶ Francis, *Querida Amazonia*, 11.

³⁴⁷ Gbetnkom, “Forest Depletion,” n.p.

³⁴⁸ Lushombo, “Deforestation in the Democratic Republic of Congo and climate change,” 728.

³⁴⁹ Lushombo, “Deforestation in the Democratic Republic of Congo and climate change,” 732.

of obtaining gas for cooking, hence the importance of wood and / or charcoal in household life. In fact, “most African households, both rural and urban, depend on fuelwood for domestic energy supply for cooking food.”³⁵⁰ For example, when I was a child, I remember my mother always using wood for cooking. This was also the case with other families. Wood is also used for heating in my village when it is cold. Note that Africans in general and Cameroonians in particular had a sense of respect for the forest because in the African spirituality, creation is essentially sacred³⁵¹. Unfortunately, this respect tends to disappear because of poverty.

Furthermore, if many rural Cameroonians are highly dependent of forest products is due to lack of education. What interests them is meeting their basic needs. The economic activity of these populations is concentrated around the exploitation of the forest. The forest, unlike other resources, does not require skilled labor for its exploitation. Fonjong says that in this way, “the forest vulnerability to degradation is compounded by the fact that unlike other natural resources (for example, petroleum or minerals), which require a high degree of technology and expertise for exploitation, human activity in the forest does not need specialized skills and huge capital. Almost anyone can get into and out of the forest with relative ease.”³⁵²

The excessive exploitation of the forest not only leads to global warming, but also to the disappearance of certain species. Farmers do not have other options. People who have the financial means can refuel in the conventional market to obtain whatever they

³⁵⁰ Gbetnkom, “Forest Depletion,” n.p.

³⁵¹ Uwimeza, “African Spirituality,” n.p.

³⁵² Fonjong, “Managing Deforestation,” n.p.

need. This is not the case for the poor. The lack of financial means almost forces them into logging.

Population growth

Deforestation is also accentuated by population growth in Cameroon. Indeed, if the world population has known a remarkable evolution for several decades, this growth is primarily due to the high birth rate observed in developing countries. Indeed, “the world has grown reaching 7 billion in 2011. Over 5.8 billion of these people reside in low- and middle- income economies.”³⁵³ Cameroon belongs to the second category, that is low-and middle-income countries.

Note that the issue of population is one of the most controversial in the field of authentic development, understood, as noted earlier, as “the development of the person and the whole person.”³⁵⁴ On one hand, some experts believe that the underdevelopment of Africa is linked to the demographic explosion. For the economist Robert McNamara, the single greatest obstacle to the economic and social advancement of the majority of the peoples in the developing world is rampant population growth.³⁵⁵ Similarly John Paul II notes, “One cannot deny the existence, especially in the southern hemisphere, of a demographic problem which creates difficulties for development.”³⁵⁶ On the other hand, some consider that population growth constitutes an opportunity for the development of developing countries. Indeed, population growth could increase the labor force which is “a

³⁵³ Dwight H. Perkins, Steven Radelet, David L. Lindauer, Steven A. Block, *Economic of Development*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2017), 217-218.

³⁵⁴ Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, 14.

³⁵⁵ Perkins, Radelet, Lindauer, Block, *Economic of Development*, 217.

³⁵⁶ John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 25.

positive factor in stimulating economic growth. A labor force means more productive manpower.”³⁵⁷

In nineteenth centuries in England, some thinkers like Thomas Malthus, an economist and British pastor, related poverty to population growth. The economist argued for the adoption of an anti-natalist policy for a balance between population and food resources. Malthus' prediction of population growth applies very well to the case of Cameroon. For instance, from 1995 to 2020, Cameroon has seen its population double from 13 million to 26 million. The population of Cameroon is experiencing a geometric growth of ratio 2, every 25 years as predicted by Malthus. However, Francis thinks that the most important thing is not to promote the birth reduction policies, but to fight effectively against poverty. He tackles the antinatalists in these terms, “Instead of resolving the problems of the poor and thinking of how the world can be different, some can only propose a reduction in the birth rate.”³⁵⁸ John Paul II adds, “[It is not] proved that all demographic growth is incompatible with orderly development.”³⁵⁹

Generally speaking, Africa is presented as the continent of the future due to its young and growing population. However, it cannot be denied that population growth is also a challenge for addressing environmental degradation in Africa in general and in Cameroon in particular. As Knox pointed out, “growing populations mean that there are more mouths to feed. Needing to feed more mouths will push Africa closer to the

³⁵⁷ Todaro, *Economic Development in the Third World*, 109.

³⁵⁸ Francis, *Laudato Si*, n.50.

³⁵⁹ John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 25.

boundaries of land system change and of biogeochemical flows: more land will have to be converted to cropland.”³⁶⁰

In Cameroon, the increase in population is accompanied by overexploitation of forests, “from 10 million in 1987 to about 15 million in 2004 [from 15 million in 2004 to 25 million in 2020]. Most of this population, whether rural or urban, depends on agriculture.”³⁶¹ To feed this growing population, the forest is called upon more. It should be added that Cameroon also supplies the surrounding countries such as Gabon and Equatorial Guinea with agricultural products. With this strong demand to satisfy and with the growing number of mouths to feed, it becomes difficult or even impossible to respect the cycles of nature in Cameroon.³⁶² The earth is forced to produce even when it needs to rest. In other words, we exploit and impoverish the earth. That is why Francis puts the earth in the new category of the poor, as noted in chapter 2.³⁶³ The earth, our mother, becomes poor because of our human responsibility. What is true for the earth in general is also true for our forests in Cameroon. Respect for the integrity of the forests cannot therefore be achieved without the control of the population.

In short, whatever the causes of deforestation, those who pay a high price are the poor. One could say, paraphrasing Pope Francis, that in Cameroon the cry of the Basin Congo forests, our common home, and the cry of the poor are connected.³⁶⁴

³⁶⁰ Peter Knox, “Planetary Boundaries: Africa’s Vulnerabilities and Resilience,” in *Fragile World: Ecology and the Church*, ed. William T. Cavanaugh, *Studies in World Catholicism*: vol. 5, (2018), 121.

³⁶¹ Fonjong, “Managing Deforestation,” n.p.

³⁶² Francis *Laudato Si*, 190. See also John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 26.

³⁶³ Francis, *Laudato Si*, 2.

³⁶⁴ Francis, *Laudato Si*, 49.

Ethical Analysis of Deforestation in the Light of Some Principles of CST

In the previous chapter, I showed how Francis made a significant change by expanding the concept of common good beyond the human good to an integral ecology. He vigorously rejects the well-established anthropocentrism of the modern era and promotes stewardship or care for creation. Some of the key features of the paradigm shift made by Francis in Catholic social teaching with his integral ecology are these: everything is connected; the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor are linked; every single element of creation has meaning in and of itself; the common good includes future generations.

In this section, first I will analyze deforestation in Cameroon in the light of integral ecology, common good, human dignity, and solidarity. And then, I will argue that “community forestry” approach is an efficient action against deforestation in Cameroon. Community forestry is relevant for CST because that approach integrates both the preferential option for (and with) the poor and participation of the poor to protect the Congo Basin Forest Cameroon which is part of our common goods.

Examination of Deforestation in the Light of Some Principles of CST

Deforestation in Cameroon is a concrete illustration of the relevance of the integral ecology promoted by Pope Francis that we explained in Chapter 2. Paraphrasing Francis, one can say: the cry of the forest and the cry of the rural poor in Cameroon are linked. We cannot longer dissociate, as Francis indicates, environmental problems from social questions. According to Scheid, “Integral ecology means that we have to begin seeing environmental and social problems together, not as isolated phenomena.”³⁶⁵ By destroying

³⁶⁵ Scheid, “*Laudato si*’ and the development of Catholic Social Teaching,” 189.

the forest of the Congo Basin in Cameroon, we cause serious damage to the Cameroonian populations, but in particular to the poor in rural areas who are the most vulnerable to the ecological crisis. Francis reminds us that everything is connected.³⁶⁶

Deforestation reveals a lack of solidarity with the rural poor in Cameroon. Solidarity here is not simply based on interdependence among people as underlined by John-Paul II in *Sollicitudo rei Socialis*, but interdependence with all creation, that is to say human and non-human creatures. In other words, integral ecology expands solidarity to global solidarity oriented towards the ecological common good: the good of all and each creature including our forests. So integral ecology allows us to have a better understanding of our interdependence with the earth and then to value the rest of creation.³⁶⁷ Integral ecology is rooted on the “belief that everything in the world is interconnected.”³⁶⁸ In fact, the good of people cannot be separated from the good of the planet as a whole.³⁶⁹

In the context of deforestation, promoting the common good means fighting against excessive individualism which lead some businesspeople to exploit the forest without considering the negative repercussions in the life of the poor. For instance, foreign companies that contribute to deforestation in Cameroon do not care about the common good, that is to say the good of all and everyone. All they care about is their individual good, maximizing their profit. They have no respect for the dignity of the poor. What Francis says about the negative actions of businesspeople on Amazon Forest can also be applied to Cameroonian forest. Businesspeople, Francis notes, simply ignore “them [the

³⁶⁶ Francis, *Laudato Si*, 70.

³⁶⁷ Miller, “Integral ecology,” 17.

³⁶⁸ Miller, “Integral ecology,” 12.

³⁶⁹ Christopher Vogt, "Catholic Social Teaching and Creation," 223.

poor] as if they [do] not exist, or acts as if the [forests] on which they live do not belong to them ... Their lives, their concerns, their ways of struggling to survive [are] of no interest. They [are] considered more an obstacle needing to be eliminated than as human beings with the same dignity as others and possessed of their own acquired rights.”³⁷⁰ As long as respect for the human dignity of the poor is not taken into consideration, it becomes difficult to achieve the common good. Meghan Clark recalls for us that “Part of the gift and task of human dignity is that everyone must be included as full members of the community.”³⁷¹

The owners of the big national and international companies that exploit the forest do not take into account the ecological cost of their actions on the lives of the poor. John Paul II reminds us that we should feel responsible for each other for the good of each and everyone. This is what he calls solidarity. But, as mentioned earlier, there is no solidarity if the other is not recognized in his/her human dignity, if the other is not seen as a brother/sister. In this direction, Francis rightly adds, “Everything is related, and we human beings [should be] united as brothers and sisters on a wonderful pilgrimage, woven together by the love God has for each of his creatures [including our forests].”³⁷²

As is the case with the Amazon Forest, the term “development” is often used as a pretext to justify the exploitation of Cameroon forest to the detriment of the rural poor.³⁷³ But it should be noted that this development has nothing to do with integral human development or the common good. The type of development that is evoked to justify the

³⁷⁰ Francis, *Querida Amazonia*, 12.

³⁷¹ Clark, “Development as Freedom Together,” 7.

³⁷² Francis, *Laudato Si*, 92.

³⁷³ Francis, *Querida Amazonia*, 12.

plundering of Cameroonian forest is only concerned with economic growth³⁷⁴ without consideration of the common good. As Margaret Pfeil points out, “The rest of creation [in particular the Basin Congo forest] is not meant to be an instrumental good offered up to insatiable capitalist consumption according to a mistaken notion of development.”³⁷⁵ That development is at the service of an economy of death, an economy that kills the rural poor because it destroys their living environment and sometimes pushes them to migrate to the big cities of Douala and Yaoundé in search of a better life. For Francis, development, or more specifically Integral Human Development – that is, moving from “what is less human to what is more human”³⁷⁶ – cannot be separated from care for creation. “They are inseparably connected through his account of integral ecology.”³⁷⁷

Furthermore, to destroy the forest of the Congo Basin, foreign companies often operate with the complicity of public authorities (as noted earlier in the treatment of the causes of deforestation in Cameroon). This is also true for the Amazon Forest. Yet, the Congo Basin and the Amazonian forests are the most important biodiversity centers of the entire earth: the problem of their deforestation affects all humanity and obviously the many unique species which have intrinsic worth themselves.³⁷⁸ “The Amazon region [like the Congo Basin] is a multinational and interconnected whole, a great biome shared by [many] countries.”³⁷⁹ Some aspects of the analysis that Francis made on Amazonia applies equally to Congo Basin. Indeed, Francis wants the Amazonia case to inspire other areas of the

³⁷⁴ Economic growth is an indicator of good governance in a country. However, in Cameroon, economic growth profits to the rulers and does not participate to the well-being of poor people living in rural areas.

³⁷⁵ Margaret R. Pfeil, “Fifty Years after *Populorum progressio*: Understanding Integral Human Development in Light of Integral Ecology,” *Journal of Catholic Social Thought*, 15, n. 1 (2018), 11.

³⁷⁶ Pfeil, “Fifty years after *Populorum Progressio*,” 7.

³⁷⁷ Pfeil, “Fifty years after *Populorum Progressio*,” 10.

³⁷⁸ Francis, *Laudato Si*, 38.

³⁷⁹ Francis, *Querida Amazonia*, 5.

world in confronting their own environmental challenges, in particular Cameroon.³⁸⁰ During the online meeting that Francis held with African students on November 1st, 2022, responding to a student from Ivory Coast, the Bishop of Rome clearly make the connection between the Congo Basin Forest in Africa and the Amazonian Forest in Latin America in relation to deforestation. According to Francis, in these two regions of our world, “deforestation is brought about by our focus on business, and [because] we tend to lose the bond between nature and human beings.”³⁸¹

Furthermore, speaking of the economy that kills in relation to deforestation, Francis writes, “when local authorities give free access to the timber companies, mining or oil projects, and other businesses that raze the forests and pollute the environment, economic relationships are unduly altered and become an instrument of death.”³⁸² This is true for Amazonia as well as for Congo Basin. It would be naive to think that business leaders who are concerned above all with increasing their profits can promote the common good. Therefore, the Cameroonian state must play a role of regulation and control. If each of us is responsible for promoting the common good, it is also true that the State has an important role to play in this regard as noted in the previous chapters.³⁸³ Francis notes that if politics is a noble vocation, it is because it aims to achieve the common good.³⁸⁴ Politics should therefore not submit to the logic of the market.³⁸⁵ Otherwise, it would serve private interests, and not serve the good of all. To promote the common good, economics and

³⁸⁰ Francis, *Querida Amazonia*, 5.

³⁸¹ Building Bridges across Africa: A Synodal Encounter between Pope Francis and University Students. Youtube video. 1.46:44, November 1st, 2022. https://youtu.be/TPa6i_ZJDK

³⁸² Francis, *Querida Amazonia*, 14.

³⁸³ John Paul II, *Centisimus annus*, 11. See also Francis, *Laudato Si*, 157.

³⁸⁴ Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, 180.

³⁸⁵ Francis, *Laudato Si*, 189.

politics must work together and be put at the service of life.³⁸⁶ The Cameroonian Forest is a common good that market forces can neither defend nor protect. Thinking only in terms of increasing profit, foreign companies are destroying the forest in Cameroon.³⁸⁷

In addition to the economic system that focused on the immediate profit, Francis points out another obstacle that prevent people from seeing the interconnections between them and their environment : a form of technology that only sees the earth as a resource to be exploited.³⁸⁸ This is not to say that Francis is against market or technology; he only condemns their narrow forms.³⁸⁹ In fact, sometimes the exploitation of the forest in Cameroon is carried out by businesses as if the earth is “a ‘product’ for our use or abuse”³⁹⁰ or a machine. Yet the “[Cameroonian forest] is not a machine.”³⁹¹ The machine is an object made by humans to facilitate the achievement of their goals. The fact that the forest is not a machine means that one should not use the forest as one uses a machine. A forest cannot produce unlimited resources. She needs to rest and to be protected by us. Unfortunately, the profit-maximizing capitalist mentality tends to exploit Cameroonian forests like a machine.

The agents of deforestation in Cameroon do not take into account the principle of the universal destination of created goods. Indeed, “God created the world for everyone.”³⁹² Thus the Cameroonian forest does not belong to a group of individuals, even if they have financial power, but is part of the common good of all Cameroonians and more broadly of

³⁸⁶ Francis, *Laudato Si*, 189.

³⁸⁷ Francis, *Laudato Si*, 189.

³⁸⁸ Miller, “Integral ecology,” 21.

³⁸⁹ Miller, “Integral ecology,” 21.

³⁹⁰ Simon Olivier, *Creation: A Guide for the Perplexed*, (Bloomsbury, 2017), 18.

³⁹¹ James H. Cone, "Whose Earth Is It Anyway?" *Cross Currents* 50, no. 1/2 (2000): 36. Accessed December 3, 2020.

³⁹² Francis, *Laudato Si*, 93.

all humanity. We have seen that the actions carried out on the Congo Basin Forest influence the climate change in other countries which are outside of Africa.

Furthermore, while environmental summits are generally organized by the Western part of the world to raise awareness of the urgency to care for creation, in Cameroon, as in many African countries, some people continue to think that it is an issue for “white people” that does not really concern them. Yet in Cameroon, many people need to think seriously about the lives and livelihood of human beings and other creatures affected by the deforestation of the Congo Basin. Cameroonian people need to reject the reign of anthropocentrism and to embrace the integral ecological approach. Francis warns that: “We can be silent witnesses to terrible injustices if we think that we can obtain significant benefits by making the rest of humanity, present and future, pay the extremely high costs of [deforestation].”³⁹³

The interdependence that human beings have with their ecosystem is undeniable. We destroy ourselves when we destroy our forests. We simply cannot tell the number of creatures (plants and animals) that may have gone extinct due to the deforestation of the Congo Basin Forest in Cameroon. Integral ecology reminds us that these creatures have their own value in themselves.³⁹⁴ Francis, counsels us, “If we approach nature and the environment without this openness to awe and wonder, if we no longer speak the language of fraternity and beauty in our relationship with the world, our attitude will be that of masters, consumers, ruthless exploiters, unable to set limits on their immediate needs.”³⁹⁵ The Cameroonian government cannot just think of the immediate benefits from the

³⁹³ Francis, *Laudato si'*, 36.

³⁹⁴ Francis, *Laudato si'*, 33.

³⁹⁵ Francis, *Laudato si'*, 11.

exportation of timbers to Western countries and China without sparing a thought for the damage that is done to the ecosystem that sustains us. Vogt insists that, “it is a practical and moral imperative that humankind develop a renewed understanding of economic and human development that is cognizant of the relationship between humans and the rest of creation.”³⁹⁶

What is happening in the Basin Congo Forest in Cameroon “has called attention to the poor as more likely than other people to suffer the effects of environmental degradation [in particular deforestation].”³⁹⁷ As stated earlier, the majority of the people, especially the poor, get their means of livelihood from the forest. Whether we want it or not the environmental degradation is a real issue and deforestation is one of its manifestations in Cameroon. The “church today has listed ecological abuses among the new forms of social sins.”³⁹⁸

In the light of integral ecology, to address the deforestation of the Basin Congo in Cameroon and its negative impacts in the life of the poor, we need to significantly consider the principles of the common good and human dignity. For Pope Francis, “respect for the dignity of the poor is an ethical imperative for attaining the common good.”³⁹⁹ Respecting the dignity of the poor living in and around forests means giving them the opportunity to benefit from the richness of the forest. If the Basin Congo Forests, our common home, is part of the common good, every people should be able to enjoy its fruits. When large international companies exploit Cameroonian forests, the poor are very often excluded

³⁹⁶ Vogt, “Catholic Social Teaching”, 223.

³⁹⁷ Vogt, “Catholic Social Teaching,” 231.

³⁹⁸ Lushombo, “Deforestation in the Democratic Republic of Congo and climate change,” 727.

³⁹⁹ Lushombo, “Deforestation in the Democratic Republic of Congo and climate change,” 739.

from sharing the wealth of the forest. Their lives do not matter. In Cameroon, as in the case in many countries of Central Africa, the local populations who live near the forest do not benefit from the wealth produced by the forest. Schools in our Cameroonian villages near the forests do not have enough benches for students. Hospitals in these areas have almost no beds.

Respecting the dignity of the rural poor in Cameroon also means giving them the opportunity to fulfill their vocation as stewards of creation.⁴⁰⁰ God creates out of love and loves creation in particular forest. He gave human beings the mission to take care of creation, not destroy it. In the life of rural poor in Cameroon, Basin Congo Forest represents their entire world, that is to say “the source for their food, and medicine, clothing, shelter.”⁴⁰¹ That is why destroying the forest in Cameroon is opposing to the rural poor the right to live or killing them. Integral ecology means that in Cameroon, people “have to begin seeing environmental and social problems together, not as isolated phenomena.”⁴⁰² Since Basin Congo Forest is a gift of God and our ancestors, deforestation should be avoided out of respect for them and also for the dignity of the rural poor living in Cameroon.⁴⁰³ Deforestation is against the will of God.⁴⁰⁴

In short, instead of the current paradigm of exploitation of our forest, a new paradigm based on care for our forest needs to be developed.⁴⁰⁵ This requires an integral

⁴⁰⁰ Tuazon, “Becoming Stewards of Creation,” 194.

⁴⁰¹ Ngoelele, “African Wisdom in Dialogue with *Laudato Si*,” 9.

⁴⁰² Scheid, “*Laudato si*’ and the development of Catholic Social Teaching,” 189.

⁴⁰³ Francis, *Laudato Si*, 145, 146.

⁴⁰⁴ Francis, *Laudato Si*, 8.

⁴⁰⁵ Martins, “*Laudato Si*’: Integral ecology,” 416.

ecology, rooted on the “belief that everything in the world is interconnected.”⁴⁰⁶ The good of people cannot be separated from the good of the planet as a whole.⁴⁰⁷

Community Forestry: Empowering the Poor to Fight Against Deforestation

According to Francis, the protection of environment requires political engagement through legal framework.⁴⁰⁸ In Cameroon, the duty of protecting the environment falls not only to every citizen, but also to the state. In the preamble of the Cameroonian constitution, one reads: “Every person shall have a right to a healthy environment. The protection of the environment shall be the duty of every citizen. The State shall ensure the protection and improvement of the environment.”⁴⁰⁹ Recognizing the right of every citizen to a healthy environment means recognizing that the Cameroonian land, in particular its forests, belongs to all Cameroonians, including the rural poor. Basin Congo Forests are our common home.

Note that “while Pope Francis recommends the establishment of a legal framework, he also acknowledges that laws may be well framed while remaining dead letter ... Although the legal framework is an important starting point, it does not ensure sustainability of forestry.”⁴¹⁰ Indeed, the legal framework can only be effective for the protection of the environment if it is accompanied by a real desire to change our ways of thinking and acting in our relationship to creation and in particular to the forest. We need to change our lifestyles and consumption choices. In other words, we need to opt for ecological conversion. For Francis, deforestation is more than an ecological sin.

⁴⁰⁶ Miller, “Integral ecology,” 12.

⁴⁰⁷ Vogt, “Catholic Social Teaching,” 223.

⁴⁰⁸ Francis, *Laudato Si*, 176.

⁴⁰⁹ Preamble of the Constitution of the Republic of Cameroon, 1996.

⁴¹⁰ Lushombo, “Deforestation in the Democratic Republic of Congo,” 735.

Deforestation is “a crime against humanity because it leads to global warming and deterioration of our atmosphere’s conditions,”⁴¹¹ making difficult the conditions of life in the earth, especially for the rural poor and future generations in Cameroon. Francis encourages African students to be “the apostles of the earth,” that is to protect their natural environment by fighting against those who are destroying their forests.⁴¹²

Poor peasants have often felt frustrated by the abusive exploitation of their environment by large international companies. To solve or at least reduce this problem, the Cameroonian government created in 1994 a Community Forestry.⁴¹³ This reflected “the need to associate the local community [who are most affected by deforestation] in the management of their resources.”⁴¹⁴ In reality, one participates better in a liberation struggle when one is the victim of an injustice or when one identifies with the defended cause. Lushombo remarks, “the vision of Community Forestry answers Pope Francis’s demand for active participation of all members of the community and suggests new processes which take into account the respect for the local cultures, the rights of people, and their socio-historical development.”⁴¹⁵ She goes further observing that “Community Forestry presents a new way of materializing the theological preferential option for the poor. The community Forestry, in ensuring that the poor themselves participate in the management and protection of their lands make not only an option for the poor, but also with the poor.”⁴¹⁶ In fact,

⁴¹¹ Building Bridges across Africa: A Synodal Encounter between Pope Francis and University Students. Youtube video. 1.46:44, November 1st, 2022. https://youtu.be/TPa6i_ZJJDk

⁴¹² Building Bridges across Africa: A Synodal Encounter between Pope Francis and University Students. Youtube video. 1.46:44, November 1st, 2022. https://youtu.be/TPa6i_ZJJDk

⁴¹³ Precillia Tata Ngome et al., “Assessing Household Food Insecurity: Experience in the Context of Deforestation in Cameroon,” *Food Policy*, 84 (2019): 57.

⁴¹⁴ Fonjong, “Managing Deforestation,” n.p.

⁴¹⁵ Lushombo, “Deforestation in the Democratic Republic of Congo,” 739.

⁴¹⁶ Lushombo, “Deforestation in the Democratic Republic of Congo,” 739.

indigenous people living around forests consider the forest as a heritage received from their ancestors and can protect it out of conviction.⁴¹⁷ For them, “[Forest] is sacred. It is a place where their ancestors and other divine spirits dwell.”⁴¹⁸ Although, sometimes due to poverty they seem to have no other alternative than overexploitation of the forest, as noted earlier. In other words, to effectively fight deforestation, the state must also engage in the fight against poverty.⁴¹⁹

The duty of the rural poor to protect their environment and the duty of the state to promote a healthy environment are related. The Cameroonian state need to provide the conditions for all citizens, especially the poor, to participate in the promotion of the common good by protecting our basin Congo Forest. “This means that the state must play a leading role”⁴²⁰ as noted earlier. If all that interests the owners of large forestry or mining companies is maximizing their profit. The State must assume the role of regulator. Lushombo says, “The first stakeholder who should play the role of regulator for the protection of the environment at national level is the government.”⁴²¹ However, the state is embodied by a government, by fallible human beings. Their interests do not always match those of the rural poor living into the forest. Community forestry that involves local populations, in particular the poor, in the management and protection of forests is an effective means to fight against deforestation. Lushombo asserts, “The vision and practices of community Forestry constitute a relevant means to fight deforestation and consequently to fight climate change.”⁴²² The poor, being the most vulnerable to the environmental crisis,

⁴¹⁷ Uwimeza, “African Spirituality,” n.p.

⁴¹⁸ Ngolele, “African Wisdom in Dialogue with *Laudato Si*,” 8.

⁴¹⁹ Francis, *Laudato Si*, 172.

⁴²⁰ Fonjong, “Managing Deforestation,” n.p.

⁴²¹ Lushombo, “Deforestation in the Democratic Republic of Congo,” 731.

⁴²² Lushombo, “Deforestation in the Democratic Republic of Congo,” 736.

could better act as a counterweight to the inordinate appetites of unscrupulous forest predators. By implementing the community forestry system, the state tries to ensure, as required by the Constitution, the protection of the environment for the good of Cameroonian people, especially the poor. As Francis notes, “the deterioration of environment [in particular deforestation] and of society affects the most vulnerable people on planet”⁴²³

Conclusion

To conclude, I would like to acknowledge that the pontificate of Pope Francis makes me more sensitive to the ecological question and to the question of the poor. “[Francis] links concern for the fragile Earth with concern for fragile people.”⁴²⁴ In the Cameroonian context, deforestation is one of the faces of the contemporary ecological crisis. Paraphrasing Francis, one can say: the cry of the forest and the cry of the rural poor in Cameroon are linked. In this chapter, I showed that building the common good in Cameroon requires our commitment to work assiduously to protect the Basin Congo Forest. Destroying the Basin Congo Forest in Cameroon means destroying the life of the rural poor. Because the forest represents an important stake in the life of indigenous populations, the Cameroonian State has a duty to support them in the preservation of this space which belongs to the common good. In fact, “Sustainable management of the forest requires a holistic approach that includes everybody. This requires a management partnership: the state [...] and the local forest communities.”⁴²⁵

⁴²³ Francis, *Laudato Si*, 48

⁴²⁴ Donal Dorr, *Option for the poor and for the earth: from Leo XIII to Pope Francis*, (Maryknoll: ORBIS. 2016), ebook.

⁴²⁵ Fonjong, “Managing Deforestation,” n.p.

GENERAL CONCLUSION

In conclusion, let us recall that the main goal of this thesis was to show how the understanding of the principle of the common good evolved in Catholic Social Teaching from Pope John Paul II to Pope Francis. As we have noted, the common good is one of the most important and distinctive concepts of Catholic Social Teaching. Its classic definition stems from the second Vatican Council's pastoral constitution *Gaudium et Spes*. The Fathers of the Council defined it as the "sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily."⁴²⁶ This means the realization of the common good is concerned with the well-being of both each of us and the whole society.⁴²⁷ One should not be sacrificed to the benefit of the other. For John Paul II the search for the common good is a collective and highly political virtue.⁴²⁸ Among the different principles of Catholic Social Teaching, he considers solidarity as essential for achieving the common good or integral human development at every level of society. "Solidarity is rooted in discovering the fact of human interdependence and in nurturing the developing of mutual relationships."⁴²⁹ One of the key criteria for evaluating the common good in a society is solidarity with the vulnerable and marginalized.⁴³⁰ Schematically speaking, if the common good can be considered as a

⁴²⁶ Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 26

⁴²⁷ Anna Rowlands, *Towards a Politics of Communion: Catholic Social Teaching in Dark Times*, (New York: T&T Clark, 2021), 257.

⁴²⁸ Mathias Nebel, "A Theological Conclusion," in *Searching for the Common Good: Philosophical, Theological and Economic Approaches*, edited by Mathias Nebel and Thierry Colland (Baden-Baden: 2018): 225.

⁴²⁹ Vogt, "Fostering a Catholic commitment to the common good," 405.

⁴³⁰ Yuengert Andrew M., "What is 'Sustainable Prosperity for All' in the Catholic Social Tradition?" in *The True Wealth of Nations*, edited by Daniel K (Oxford University Press: 2010): 42.

destination, solidarity is the best way to achieve it or at least to get closer to it. As Scheid points out, “Solidarity inclines people to act for the common good.”⁴³¹

While John Paul II observes that people and nations are increasingly interconnected and interdependent around the world, Francis stresses that “everything is interconnected.”⁴³² For the latter, “What happens to the ecosystem affects everything else.”⁴³³ As we have seen, with integral ecology, Francis expands our understanding of the common good beyond humanity to the ecological common good which entails care for God’s creation. Francis demonstrates that the contemporary ecological crisis is the consequence of a tyrannical anthropocentrism in which human being have considered themselves to be masters of nature.⁴³⁴ To save our mother earth, we need a common response that is care for creation. This can only take place if people realize that they are not the owners of creation but stewards.

For Francis, ecological devastation affects all humanity but more especially the poor. This is particularly true in Cameroon. Paraphrasing the current Bishop of Rome, one can say: the cry of the forest and the cry of the rural poor in Cameroon are linked. We cannot longer dissociate, as Francis indicates, environmental problems from social questions. Destroying the Basin Congo Forest in Cameroon means destroying the life of the rural poor. In fact, the “broken environment we live in shows our broken humanity [lack of solidarity].”⁴³⁵ I have argued that solidarity – as part of our commitment for the

⁴³¹ Scheid, *The Cosmic Common Good: Religious Grounds for Ecological Ethics*, 87.

⁴³² Francis, *Laudato Si*, 70.

⁴³³ Ngolele, “African Wisdom in Dialogue with *Laudato Si*,” 10.

⁴³⁴ Miller, “Integral ecology,” 16.

⁴³⁵ Ngolele, “African Wisdom in Dialogue with *Laudato Si*,” 5.

common good – with the rural poor most affected by the deforestation of Basin Congo in Cameroon, requires our engagement to protect forests: care for creation.

As a whole, recognizing the link between the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor⁴³⁶ allowed Pope Francis to evolve John Paul II's understanding of the principle of the common good beyond the good of humanity alone. If for John Paul II the commitment for the common good requires interpersonal solidarity, for Francis it involves the care for all creation: integral ecology.

⁴³⁶ Francis, *Laudato Si'*, 139.

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