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Befriending the Earth Towards a Doxological Approach to the Environment

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1. Introduction

When the media speak of climatic change and the deterioration of the ozone layer, Africans, Nigerians in particular, tend to think that it is a problem of the West. I once heard a friend saying: “those people over there create problems that do not exist”. I struggled to make him observe that seasons are no longer regular; the harmattan has almost disappeared; in our cities the blue sky and the moonlight have disappeared in layers of smoke, and that sicknesses have multiplied because of the polluted air we breathe in everyday. The reality is that from day to day, the world experiences an alarming environmental and ecological degradation. This was emphasized during the recently concluded Second Synod for Africa.¹ The tragedy is that many people are not aware of what is happening and those who are do not have the courage to face the challenge.

This article wishes to propose a theological interpretation of the present day environmental crisis. Positively, it proposes a new attitude towards the environment as creation of God entrusted to the stewardship of man. The thesis defended here is that the present day environmental crisis is not merely a crisis in the natural environment of the human being, but it is a spiritual crisis in the human beings themselves; it has to do with the incapacity to receive the world as gift from God and to perceive oneself as steward of that gift.² A discernment of the world as creation of God and conversion to this God will lead to a doxological approach to the environment; that is, giving glory to God through

¹ *Synodus Episcoporum Bulletin*, II Ordinary Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops 4-25 October 2009, Propositions 22 & 29.

² This thesis toes the line of the theology of creation developed by the German Lutheran theologian, Jrgen Moltmann, *God in Creation - An Ecological Doctrine of Creation*, London: SCM Press, 1985, pxi.

his creation which of course is first and foremost caring for the creation.

First, the magnitude of the ecological and environmental crisis will be ex-rayed from the African and western contexts as a spiritual crisis in the human being. Second the idea of creation as work of God entrusted to the stewardship of mankind will be exposed. Finally a doxological approach to the environment will be proposed as solution to the present day environmental crisis.

2. The Environmental Crisis as Spiritual Crisis

The Second Synod for Africa describes the environmental crisis as follows:

We observe that many human beings, at all levels, have continued to abuse nature and destroy God's beautiful world by exploitation of natural resources beyond what is sustainable and useful. There is an irresponsible degradation and senseless destruction of the earth, which is "our mother". In complicity with those who exercise political and economic leadership in Africa, some businesses, governments and multinational and transnational companies engage in business that pollute the environment, destroy flora and fauna, thus causing unprecedented erosion and desertification of large areas of arable land. All these threaten the survival of mankind and the entire eco-system.³

Each word of this declaration merits to be meditated upon. For the purpose of our reflection, suffice it to say that the present ecological disaster, in the global world is mostly caused by human beings who instead of caring for nature as gift from God exploit it "beyond what is sustainable and useful", for simply selfish and

³ Second Synod for Africa, Proposition 22.

economic reasons. The Synod delegates state clearly that this is at the origin of ecological problems like, global warming, natural calamities (like earthquakes, seaquakes and their consequences like tsunami). Some scientists may think that this judgment is too severe for the human being, because some of these disasters can be explained from geology and the composition of nature itself. Nevertheless the idea that human beings contribute to natural ecological disasters has to be taken seriously. The theological question that one needs to ask here is this, how come that the human being charged by God to take care of creation turned to exploit creation? Let us attempt to answer this question from the Western and African contexts.

2.1 *Modern man and auto-foundation*

The present crisis has to be considered against the backdrop of the modern eclipse of God from the human experience of the world and the transformation of the world into a human product. Dietrich Bonhoeffer refers to this experience by saying that modern man wanted to live *et si Deus non daretur* (as if God does not exist). This is precisely what is here called 'auto-foundation'. The German theologian Eberhard Jngel describes the crisis as a consequence of modern man's search for autonomy. Man makes himself the measure of all things. There is henceforth a divorce between God and the world, God and mankind, the created natural world and the fabricated world.

One could aptly describe the modern age as the period in which the transition is taking place from the utilization of the natural world through the processing or working of it to the replacement of nature as it is more and more used up through construction and the production of an artificial world. This step from the working of the world by *homo faber* to the production of the world has led to the serious disturbance of the once well-ordered relationship of God experience, world experience, and self experience. Earlier, God was experienced

as eternally enduring, the world by contrast as temporal, and man as a being between God and the world which participates both in the eternal and in the temporal aspects. Ever since its initiation the modern world tends to become more and more what man makes of it, and God is methodically set aside. The world forces itself into God's place, as the world of man.⁴

The paradox described here is that the more the human being gives greater meaning to the world as human production, an artificial world, the more mankind loses the meaning of the world as God's creation and hence as gift from God. Human concern is now that of domination and conquering of the world. The world is now exploited as nature, knowable, controllable and usable. This is what the Second Synod for Africa calls "the exploitation of natural resources beyond what is sustainable and useful." In its document the *Church in the Modern World*, the Vatican II Council presents this crisis as part of the anguish of the world.⁵

2.2 *Polluting the Earth in Africa*

African traditions consider nature as sacred. The earth is sacred and it is under the custody of a deity; for the Igbo of Nigeria this deity is *Ala*. Certain trees are considered sacred because they stand as point of contact between the visible and invisible worlds. I remember what it took the elders of our village to accept the cutting of an iroko tree (*orji*) in the late 70s. They understood quite well that the tree was in the axis of a new road to be constructed. They were also aware of the fact that industrialists were eyeing the wood and that it would bring them a substantial amount of money. However they considered the tree as the presence of an ancestor among them and cutting it could bring disorder in the community. When it became clear to them that the tree had to be cut, they had to convene the whole community to a

⁴Eberhard Jungel, *God as Mystery of the World*, Translated from German by Darrel L. Guder, Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1983, p52.

⁵Gaudium et Spes, 4-7.

ritual during which the ancestor was appeased and asked to let go the tree and to make other trees spring up in other parts of the land.

This however, does not reflect in the way present day Africans handle their environment, especially in the cities. No one ever does *mea culpa* for cutting firewood, destroying the environment, throwing dust bins around the environment, sheeting and urinating around the house. As children, we used to spend our time pursuing and killing all edible animals around the house and in the bushes around. Today we have no qualms in importing old cars and machines rejected in the West that pollute the atmosphere. Market places are filled with generators that not only emit toxic gas in the air but also generate unbearable noises that destroy the eardrums of sellers and buyers alike. One could attribute this to ignorance. However, this thesis can no longer hold given the level of awareness of the necessity of hygiene in our society. The truth is that the African traditional understanding of nature, the earth as sacred, is gradually eroding. It has to be noted also that the exploitation of natural resources in Africa by multinational companies without respect for populations or respect for the environment is done with the complicity of many privileged local people.⁶

2.3 *The Heaven-bound Christians*

Part of the reason why we care less for the earth is a misinterpretation of the Christian understanding of salvation. Many have understood salvation only in the individualized form as going to heaven. The aspiration to go to heaven sometimes leads Christians to disregard the earth. Jesus' expression "What then will a man gain if he wins the whole world and ruins his life? (Matt 16:26) is interpreted as a call to neglect the things of this world. They tend to forget that heaven and earth are inseparably filled with the glory of God and that the earth itself is supposed to be a mirror of heaven. Do we not ask God in the *Pater Noster*, to

⁶Second Synod for Africa, Proposition 29.

let his will be done on earth as it is done in heaven?

The solution to the problems stated above is spiritual and moral. It lies in the discernment of the world as creation of God and of mankind as steward of creation.

3. The World as a Creation of the Trinitarian God

What do we mean when we confess in the *Credo* that God is the Creator and that the World is his creation? To answer this question, we must refer to Jrgen Moltmann who guides us to rediscover the meaning of ecology. It is made of two Greek words *oikos* (house) and *logos* (discuss, doctrine) which means the doctrine of the house. What is a house if not a dwelling place? The theology of creation has to unveil how "God through his Holy Spirit dwells in his creation as a whole, and in every individual created being, by virtue of his Spirit holding them together and keeping them in life"⁷.

It is often said that the human being is the crown of creation or that creation is made for the human being. The injunction in Gen 2:15, "till the earth and tend it" is misinterpreted as a divine license given to man to conquer and dominate the earth. This anthropocentric view of the universe has to be criticized.

The Bible tells us that God created the world and all that is in it. Moreover God rejoiced over his creation and saw that it was good. He did not only create human beings, he created plants, trees, animals. He cares for them and they all participate in his glory. Human beings have to respect trees (Deut 20:19-20) and animals (Ex 23:12; Deut 26:6-7; 25:4)⁸. God takes care of even the minutest things as the grass in the field (Matt 6:50). The injunction "till the earth and tend it" refers to the kinship, not

⁷ Moltmann, *God in Creation*, pxii.

⁸ Cf. Nicholas Mbogu, "God as Our Environment: In Search of Christian Environmental Ethic", in Bede Ukwuije (Ed), *God, Bible and African Traditional Religion*, SNAAP Press, Enugu, 2010, (pp 247-272) p253.

kinship, with the rest of creation. The Hebrew word *Avad* "means not only to till, or even to work in a more general sense; it also means, more powerfully to serve or to participate in the worship of the divine."⁹ Moltmann also states clearly that the crown of creation is not the human being but the Sabbath. "It is true that, among all creatures man is the one created as the image of God, and as such, he has a special position in creation. However, he stands together with all other earthly and heavenly beings in the same hymn of praise of God's glory."¹⁰

Numerous Psalms attest to the fact that all creatures participate in singing the glory of God the Creator. Psalm 8 notes that God's majesty is chanted above the heavens and throughout the earth. Man occupies a special place among the creatures; he is made little less than a God, but the moon and stars, sheep and oxen, birds of the air and fish of the sea all sing the glory of the creator (See also Ps 19, and 104). The Canticle of the three children in Daniel 3 is like a summit of the jubilation of the whole creation in the glory of the Creator.

Creation is not only made for the glory of the Lord here on earth, it is also destined to eternity in God. The "belief in the resurrection looks toward God as the very point where humanly speaking there is nothing to hope for and nothing to be done,"¹¹ in other words, God is the destiny of all creation.

The resurrection is a proof that God takes care of creation as its author and sustainer. This became clearly manifest in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. In fact, faith in God as creator is clarified and consolidated in the death and resurrection of Jesus, the son of God. Through this, the first Christians discerned the eschatological redemption of the whole creation through Christ and by consequence "the deduction that the protological creation had its foundation in Christ."¹² This is what Paul sings in Eph 1:1-

⁹ Mbogu, "God as Our Environment", p. 249

¹⁰ Moltmann, *God in Creation*, p31.

¹¹ Moltmann, *God in Creation*, p92.

¹² Moltmann, *God in Creation*, p92.

9, that all things were created through him and for him. Or again, "He is the image of the invisible God and the first-born of all creation; for in him all things were created" (Col 1:15-16). This is in line with the Jewish tradition that sees non-human creation as intimately bound up with the fate of human beings. It goes back to Gen 3:17-19. Creation and humanity are understood as sharing a "common fate."¹³ Paul builds on this "common fate" by proclaiming that non-human creation will share with human beings in the final restoration of all things in Christ, which will involve a renewal (cf. Rom 8:19-27).

The Bible attests also that God is present to his creation through the power of the Holy Spirit. Moltmann calls this mode of presence, the *indwelling* of God in creation. The indwelling of the Holy Spirit in creation reveals that God is not indifferent to the suffering of creation. The Spirit "works towards the glorification of God through creation when all things will be completely united in love and all forms of bondage overcome."¹⁴ The Spirit (*ruach*) was present at the beginning of creation creating space for creation to emerge (Gen 1:2). The Spirit is the breath of God breathed into man to give him life. Everything that lives does so through the breath of the God in the Spirit (Ps 104:29-30). In the prophetic literature, the Spirit is the power of the coming of a new age. The Spirit is seen as the power which guided Israel in the past, preserves her in the present and will be her future hope of renewal. The abiding presence of God among his people is the sign of God's covenant (Isa 63:10-14). In the community of Christ, "the power of the Holy Spirit is the creative power of God which justifies sinner and gives life to the dead. The gift of the Holy Spirit is therefore eternal life. In the gift and through the powers of the Holy Spirit a new divine presence is experienced in creation. God the Creator takes up his dwelling in his creation and makes it his home"¹⁵. This indwelling of the Spirit of God in

¹³ Cf. Denis Edwards, "Eucharist and Ecology" in SEDOS Bulletin 2009, vol 41, no 7/8, July-August, (pp160-180)p184.

¹⁴ Bona Ugwu, *The Spirit as Present and Active in Cosmic Turmoil and human Suffering. A Dialogue between Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and Jurgen Moltmann*, Rome, 2004, p165.

¹⁵ Moltmann, *God in Creation*, p. 96

creation turns creation's history of suffering into a history of hope.

It follows from the above reflections, that the universe cannot be viewed as a closed up system left on its own, or as a human product. A sound theology of creation makes us understand that it is open for God and that God is its future. This theocentric biblical world picture invites the human being to understand himself as a member of the community of creation. A discovery of his kinship with and responsibility for the creatures of the earth sets the human being free to experience the world as the glory of God.

4. Towards a Doxological Approach to the Environment

In Nigeria there have been several political moves to keep the environment clean and establish respect for nature. One cannot forget the famous Green Revolution, War Against Indiscipline. To these, one must add the present clean up exercise in different states on the last Saturday of every month, popularly known in Imo State of Nigeria as "Clean and Green". These "revolutions" lasted as or will last as long as the governments which put them in place lasted or will last. The solution is not only political or economic, it is spiritual and moral.

4.1 *Praising God through creation*

The first attitude should be doxological, that is expression of gratitude to God for the world he created and for sustaining the entire creation through his power. Without yielding to the temptation of pantheism, we have to recognize the fact that the world is filled with the glory of God and expresses this glory. Saint Maximus the Confessor invites us to celebrate a cosmic liturgy, the world being a magnificent altar on which human beings give glory and thanks to God. We need to have a heart full of love and compassion for the whole creation. We need humility in order to recognize the beauty of creation even in the creatures which we do not consider as beautiful.

4.2 *Care for the Earth*

The above reflection authorizes an eco-theological reversal of

Jesus' expression in Matt 16:26 to read: What then will a man gain if he wins heaven and loses the world? It then means that the journey towards heaven, rightly understood as salvation involves taking care of the earth and the environment. This goes back to the saying of an Orthodox Saint, Nicephore de Chio, "If you do not love trees, you cannot love God."¹⁶ Definitely, we are going to be judged on the tenderness and respect we manifest towards nature as expression of the glory of God.

Catholics experience reconciliation with God and the other through the practice of confessions. Has it ever occurred to anybody to ask God forgiveness for polluting the environment? Has it ever occurred to market women to ask God pardon for selling vegetables dumped on a hip of wastes or on a floor full of mud or for selling meat exposed to dust and flies? Even in our prayers, we pray for the poor, the needy, the sick, etc, has it ever occurred to anybody that *Nworie River* at Owerri, the River Niger, or other rivers around our cities and villages could take their place at the same level with the poor, the sick and the marginalized that need to be saved? We can only do this when we come to consider these as works of God participating not only in the health of mankind but above all in the glory of God.

The care for the earth has to be done through urgent practical and concrete actions. These are well articulated by the Second Synod for Africa:

To make the earth habitable beyond the present generation and to guarantee sustainable and responsible care of the earth, we call upon the particular churches to:

- promote environmental education and awareness;
- persuade their local and national governments to

¹⁶See the reflections of the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople recent symposium Olivier Abel et alii, *Ethique et changement climatique*, Paris, le Pommier, 2009, pp192-196.

adopt policies and binding legal regulations for the protection of the environment and promote alternative and renewable sources of energy; and - encourage all to plant trees and treat nature and its resources, respecting the common good and the integrity of nature, with transparency and respect for human dignity.¹⁷

5. Conclusion

The thesis stated and maintained in this article is that the present environmental crisis has a connection with the spiritual crisis of human beings themselves, precisely, their conception of the world and themselves. We maltreat the earth because we refuse to receive it as a gift from God. If we admit that God dwells in his creation which includes the heavens and the earth, then a new attitude towards the earth and all beings living in it becomes possible. Understanding creation as the work of God implies a total solidarity among the different elements of nature. It helps humanity to understand that they have the special responsibility to preserve and develop the earth and all that lives in it. They do it as their participation in the Glory of God the Creator.

¹⁷Second Synod for Africa, Proposition 22.