

**CLIMATE CHANGE AND FARMERS/HERDERS CLASHES  
IN NIGERIA: SIGNIFICANCE OF CHRISTIAN  
ENVIRONMENTALISM AND POPE FRANCIS' LAUDATO  
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**Abstract**

*This chapter puts forward Christianity as a strong force to reckon with in providing theological and ethical foundations, the impulse and motivation needed to engender change in our attitude towards the environment. Even though there are some voices today who doubt the ability of religion to offer any meaningful impact towards an integral ecology and full development of humanity, the author believes that religion, especially Christianity, can offer a very significant and meaningful contribution to the situation. This is also the stance of Pope Francis and other Christian environmentalists whose thoughts and approaches are to be examined in the chapter. In his encyclical on the care of the environment, *Laudato si*, Pope Francis, just like many other Christian theologians, harps on the goodness of nature, gives it a theological backing starting with the Book of Genesis when God created the universe out of nothing and declared it very good. The pope observes that the damage we do today on nature is a manifestation that the relationship between human beings and other creatures has become confrontational and unfriendly.*

**Keywords:** Climate Change, Farmers, Herders, Environment, Africa, Nigeria, Theology, Christian, Pope Francis

**Introduction**

Climate change can no longer be reasonably ignored in any serious analysis of, and research on, herdsman/farmers clashes in Nigeria. The changes occurring in rainfall patterns, availability of forage due to desertification and drought, and other extreme weather conditions engendered by human interventions in nature and consequent degradation of the environment readily induce forced migrations of population from one part of the country to another. The northern part of Nigeria, which is also the hottest part, experience the effect of these extreme weather conditions more than others. This has affected their traditional economic and social activities, especially the Fulani tribe, who are mainly cattle herders. Granted that the country has a long-

standing traditional cause of conflicts among its different communities, tribes, and cultures, the question of climate change has worsened the situation. Even though the Fulani tribe has been traditionally known to wander from place to place with their cattle for grazing, which had hitherto been more regular and seasonal, extreme weather conditions caused by climate change has made their movement more irregular and disruptive, forcing them to move southwards on a massive scale looking for water and forage for their livestock.

This forced migration, among other factors, has brought about clashes between them and their host communities, as they struggle for scarce resources, like land, water and green vegetation. Sometimes, in the bid to feed their livestock, they wander into people's farms destroying crops on large scale. Many lives and properties have been lost in the continuous feuds between the herders and farmers. It is not enough to merely deploy security operatives to quell such communal crises when they erupt, nor is it adequate to merely introduce legislations on the latest techniques in ranching as a solution. As good as these may be, without the government, companies, and individuals taking bold steps to improve on their attitude towards the environment thus curbing the unconscionable harm done to it, any solution could be nothing but tangential.

It is against this background that the this chapter is composed, putting forward Christianity as a strong force to reckon with in providing theological and ethical foundations, the impulse and motivation needed to engender change in our attitude towards the environment. Even though there are some voices today who doubt the ability of religion to offer any meaningful impact towards an integral ecology and full development of humanity, the author believes that religion, especially Christianity, can offer a very significant and meaningful contribution to the situation. This is also the stance of Pope Francis and other Christian environmentalists whose thoughts and approaches are to be examined in the chapter. In his encyclical on the care of the environment, *Laudato si*, Pope Francis, just like many other Christian theologians, harps on the goodness of nature, gives it a theological backing starting with the Book of Genesis when God created the universe out of nothing and declared it very good. The pope observes that the damage we do today on nature is a manifestation that the relationship between human beings and other creatures has become confrontational and unfriendly. According to him, "if we no longer

speak the language of fraternity and beauty in our relationship with the world, our attitude will be that of master, consumers, ruthless exploiters, unable to set limits on their immediate needs” (par. 11). According to him, in so far as we do not have the courage, in spite of our uniqueness amidst other creatures, to call them our brothers and sisters and treat them as such, things are bound to get worse.

The author is convinced that the approaches to the environment espoused by Pope Francis and other Christian environmentalist could and should be adopted by our Nigerian society in order to mitigate the effects of climate change on its citizens and reduce the rate of communal clashes, especially between farmers and herders. This is especially true as Christianity is one of the two dominant religions in Nigeria.

#### **From climate change to migration and conflicts**

In recent times, researches have been conducted linking climate change to migrations, and then to conflicts in some parts of the globe, especially Africa. It has indeed been estimated that by 2050 the number of migrants resulting from environmental events and processes would have been between 200 million to 1 billion (Myers, 2002; Stern et. al., 2006). Linking climate change to migrations does not necessarily mean that displacement of populations is directly caused by climate change, which often merely introduces conditions that worsen a population’s vulnerability and endangers their survival, thus, making them move elsewhere in search of better survival conditions.

One of the adverse conditions resulting from climate change is severe limitations on the availability and regularity of natural resources. It is true that, for nomadic cultures and pastoralists, periodic mobility has been part of their livelihood for centuries, in recent times, such movements that used to be somehow regular and had followed a definite pattern have been severely disrupted by extreme weather events, like droughts, storms, floods, and environmental changes, like desertification and soil erosion. Martin (2009) expounds four different ways climate change can affect migration, viz., worsening of natural disasters; hotter weather and drought affecting crop yield and availability of clean water; rising sea levels that makes coastal areas uninhabitable; competition over resources that may lead to conflict and displacement. As Lazcko and Aghazarm (2009) affirm, even though slow-onset events and gradual degradations, like drought and

desertification, may give people some time for decision-making as regards migration, they “can also directly threaten rural household income sources, especially those from agriculture, leading many rural agricultural families to diversify their income which may entail migration” (p. 24).

Whereas migrations induced by climate change could either be forced, as in case of natural disasters, it could as well be voluntary, especially where the effects of climate change is not sudden. In such cases, other factors which may be economic, social, or political could also play key roles (Laczko and Aghazarm, 2009). Besides, most environmental migrations happen internally within countries or from a country to its closes international borders, and those who lack the capacity to move usually stay behind and suffer the consequences (Laczko and Aghazarm).

Factors arising from climate change could drive a people permanently away from their base, leading to settlements among people of disparate cultures, competition over already stressed resources, and conflicts (Maxwell and Reuveny, 2000; Homer-Dixon, 2001). Because communities deprived of resources and turned into environmental migrants are often less endowed to bargain with or confront the state, they usually vent their grievances on their neighbouring or host communities who may possess the scarce resources or other resources needed for their survival (Hendrix and Salehyan, 2012). Further, the less developed a place is, the severer the effects of climate change, because of huge dependence of their economy on climate-sensitive sectors and their low capacity to adapt to the changes (Laczko and Aghazarm, 2009).

In 2011, Nigeria had projected that, in near future, climate change “is likely to become a major driver of increased human conflict” (Federal Ministry of Environment, 2011). This has become a reality today. The effects of global climate change have actually affected the traditional pastoralism practised by the Fulani tribe, who live mainly in the northern part of the country. As Idowu (2018) affirms, Lake Chad, for instance, that had been a very strong driving force in the agricultural sector of northern Nigeria, which is the driest part of the country, has shrunk in less than three decades from 45,000km<sup>2</sup> to 3000km<sup>2</sup>. This alone has led to the displacement of about 10.5 million people. This, coupled other factors, like unrestrained afforestation, desertification,

and drought, have made the erstwhile seasonal southward movement of herdsmen with their cattle in search of water and forage very irregular and massive.

As a matter of fact, because of the environmental degradation in the north and its consequences for the livelihood and survival of the herders, many of them seem to seek for places in the south for permanent settlement. As they move with their cattle, they trespass farmlands of mostly subsistent farmers, destroying crops on large scale. In the bid to protect their farmlands, bloody confrontations with the herdsmen often erupt. These have led to the killing and rustling of cattle, destruction of properties of receiving communities, as well as death of many innocent citizens. Their movement has had an enormous impact on the country's economic, social, cultural, and political potentials and prospects, even though little is done by the government to arrest its trend.

Orakpo (2021) laments that what originally were harmless quarrels over grazing routes between famers and herders had in recent times degenerated into bloody clashes that have affected such states as Plateau, Benue, Adamawa, Nasarawa, Taraba, and other southern states. Today, it has been given political, ethnic, and religious connotations and colorations. According to Orakpo, over 400,000 persons have been displaced from their homes on account of these clashes since 2018 when it escalated.

In Benue state, for example, the governor, Ortom (2021) asserts that there are about 1.5 million internally displaced people resulting from herdsmen/farmers clash in the state. According to him, the invasion of the people's farmlands by the herdsmen has resulted in unavailability of enough arable lands for farming activities, which had hitherto been providing a solid support to the state economy. This, he says, has also affected children most of whom no longer attend schools and are living under subhuman conditions.

### **Some environmental events and environmentally harmful practices in Nigeria**

Nigeria has witnessed severe environmental events as a result of climate change. Some harmful practices of indigenes have helped to bring these about. To be discussed below are some of the most common of those events and harmful practices.

### **a. Deforestation**

Forests have been receiving huge international attention in recent times due to their considerable importance in climate change debate. Availability of trees is a key factor in slowing the pace of climate change. It helps to preserve and support human life, wildlife, and in the maintenance of ecosystem. As Nunez (2019) points out, among other things, trees help to purify the air we breathe by absorbing the carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. It also absorbs the heat-trapping greenhouse gases that human activities emit, which helps to increase global warming and climate change. Deforestation is one of the ways forests are cleared and trees are got rid of mainly by human activities thus endangering the lives of humans and other living creatures. It has been defined as the conversion of forest land to another use or the long-term reduction of this parameter below 10% threshold (Kanninen et. al 2007). Available scientific data show that deforestation is happening on alarming scale worldwide, especially in South America.

In Nigeria, forests are lost without adequate records. According to Ogunlele, Oladipo, and Adebisi (2016), some factors responsible for this include urbanization, overpopulation, developmental projects, agricultural expansion, mining, bush burning, logging, and fuel wood collection. These activities need to be checked through attitudinal change, proper legislation, and their enforcement.

### **b. Drought**

National Geographic (2013) defines drought as a lengthy period of an unusually dry weather in an area or region, thus making it experience a level of precipitation that is below the normal. The possible aftermath of such reduced precipitation include decrease in soil water, stream flow, green vegetation, crop production, as well as scarcity of drinking water, poor nutrition, and rise in communicable diseases. If left unchecked, drought may lead to disastrous consequences, like sever famine, involuntary migration, and violent struggle over residual resources.

The assessment of the Nigerian climate over the period 1941 to 2000 by the Nigeria Meteorological Agency (NiMET, 2008) shows that the length of the rainy season in most parts of the country was shortened, and the annual rainfall decreased by 2-8mm, even though it increased in few places, like Port Harcourt, by 2-4mm. Within the same period, there was evidence of increase in the long-term temperature in most

parts of the country, especially in the extreme north-east, extreme northwest and extreme southwest regions where average temperature rise was 1.4-1.9°C.

The close link between desertification and drought has been noted by Olagunju (2015) and Oladipo (1993). Olagunju observes that these two agents, together with human activities, do transform fertile lands into deserts, thus becoming an ecological hazard to the human population. Hendrix and Salehyan (2012) have shown how drought can lead to conflict among population, because of scarcity of water needed by farmers, herders, industrialists, and other professions for greater productivity. Competitions over residual water may readily pitch them against themselves. A recent NASA study (National Geographic 2013) predicts warmer worldwide temperatures. This entails that some parts of the world will continue to experience increased rainfall while others will experience its decrease. This will lead to both more flooding and more droughts worldwide, resulting in damage to habitats, loss of biodiversity, soil erosion, an increased risk from wildfires, over-farming, overgrazing, and deforestation, as the case may be. Things will therefore get worse if nothing serious is done.

### **c. Desertification**

United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification, UNCCD (1994, part 1, art. 1) defines desertification as “land degradation in arid, semi-arid and dry sub-humid areas resulting from various factors, including climatic variations and human activities”. By such degradation, the biological and economic productivity of the land is seriously affected, making green vegetation and water very difficult to be found for livestock and other agricultural activities. Desertification has been a serious scourge in the northern part of Nigeria for decades. Arid and semi-arid areas in the region are becoming drier as Sahara Desert characteristics increasingly impinge on them. Continuous decline in rainfall in those desert-prone areas worsen the situation to a frightening proportion (Abubakar and Yamuda, 2013).

The Federal Government of Nigeria (2021), through the Minister for Environment, Dr. Mohammed Abubakar, recently reported that a total of 15 northern states of the federation, with the population of about 40 million have been hit by desertification and are suffering the effects. Part of the effects is lack of water and pasture for farming activities with

its attendant consequences. According to Olagunju (2015), this phenomenon has been reported in Nigeria since 1920s and those places affected represent one-fifth of the landmass of the country, and are the producers of much of the food items consumed by the country's rapidly burgeoning population. Olagunju further points out some human activities that help to destroy the natural environment on which the desert encroachment feeds, viz., indiscriminate bush burning, deforestation for commercial purposes or for firewood, urbanization, and agro-activities on marginal lands. All these leave the land vulnerable and unable to withstand the forces of nature, making re-growth of vegetation on them impossible. Further, these also lead to loss of bio-diversity, increase in diseases, water scarcity, reduced crop yield, economic downturn, as well as affect the soil's geochemical composition.

As affirmed by Hendrix and Salehyan (2012), once farmlands for farmers and pasture for herders are lost this way, the result is struggle for any available and productive land. This could easily degenerate into violent conflicts. The frequent and intense clashes between Fulani herders and farmers is a case in point.

#### **d. Flooding**

Deviations from normal rainfall patterns can easily affect users of land. For places that experience higher-than-normal rainfall over a long period of time, mudslides, flooding, crop damages, and rise in communicable diseases may result. It may also destroy critical infrastructure, like roads, in the affected communities, making access to them by government for intervention very much limited (Hendrix and Salehyan, 2012). Undoubtedly, this will affect the economic and social life of the people, leaving them vulnerable to exacerbate danger, frustration, and violence. Due to crop damage and resultant food shortages, prices of commodities may hike. It is easy for pastoralists in drought zones to move to areas with excess rainfall because of availability of green pastures and water for their flocks in those places. This movement may lead to encroachment on the already distressed farmlands resulting in feuds.

#### **Climate change and Christian environmentalism**

Environmentalism covers all efforts at the preservation, reestablishment, and enhancement of the natural environment and ecosystem. It explores how interconnected human beings are with nature, how our survival depends on it, as well as our duty of care and



protection towards it (Weldon, 2011). As Peterson del Mar (2014) rightly puts it, it “dwells on the paradoxical relationship between prosperity and nature loving” (p. 2).

Despite the genuine efforts world over to see how humans could cater for our natural environment and avoid its wanton destruction, there are still some skeptics and critics who see the whole endeavor as merely elitist and political and as based on false assumptions. Gibson (2002), for instance, insists that environmentalism does not seek to offer solution to any specific problem nor does it attempt in any way to protect nature. According to him, it is merely a political doctrine, a worldview, and an ideology of the elites designed out of fear that invention and material progress by others would be a threat to their power and influence.

Such skepticisms notwithstanding, environmentalism has come to stay and has helped a lot in ameliorating the danger posed to nature by human beings world over. People of different religious traditions have also tried in diverse ways to identify elements in their tradition that address environmental and ecological concerns. In fact, there is strong belief in many religious circles that religious faith has an important contribution to make in the ecological movement, especially as it concerns stimulating the movement from within by offering meaning and ethical foundations (Edwards, 2006). Hence, the formation of the National Religious Partnership for the Environment, NRPE, by the different religions in America backed by their core belief that caring for the whole of creation is an integral part of religious life. Jointly and separately, these traditions promote values inherent in them that can stimulate human-friendly approach towards nature, as well as debunk ideas that favour nature’s unbridled exploitation in the name of development and progress. Their commitment to this has made some leading environmentalists today see religious traditions as collaborators in protecting the world’s ecosystem and halting global climate change.

Christian environmentalism is just one form of this religious concern for the natural environment. It is anchored on the idea that, in Jesus Christ of Nazareth, God is present among us, as well as he is in the grace of the Holy Spirit. The effect of this presence is expected to touch not only the human species but the whole of created reality, which St. Paul says is groaning awaiting redemption by Christ (Rom. 8:22). The

task before Christian environmentalists and ecological theology is therefore to show the link between faith in Jesus Christ and the commitment to ecology. It involves devoting more time to developing more creation-centered theology and spirituality (Edwards, 2006). It is a call for what Pope John Paul II (2001), calls ecological conversion by which humans take side with nature that has suffered and is still suffering from human exploitation. This entails becoming more sensitive to the goodness of the environment and seeing it as moral obligation to cater for it, to protect, and to preserve it.

Nigeria has a lot to gain from Christianity (so much so from Islam and traditional religion) in its effort to address the challenges posed by climatic change, especially as Christianity is one of the two major religions in the country.

### **Approaches in Christian environmentalism**

There is a growing body of literature among Christian theologians and environmentalists on the foundations of Christian commitment to ecology. This is a welcome development, because for many centuries, the prevailing attitude to the natural world among Christians, especially in the West, was that of domination and exploitation. Considering the preeminent position occupied by the human person amidst other creatures, many promoted an extreme form of anthropocentrism that sees humans not only as the centre of all there is but also as somehow separate from them. By the stress on human transcendence over the natural world and the intrinsic value of human life, Boslaugh (2013) notes, human beings were understood to be at liberty to use the natural world as they wished, so long as human selfish interests are upheld. The value of the natural world was therefore an instrumental one, thus, there seemed not to be any moral or practical justification for legislations against the exploitation of the natural environment.

It is unfortunate that one still finds some Christians in support of this position, and they justify their stance by referring to the biblical injunction given by God to our first parents to “have dominion” over other creatures and to “be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth and subdue” it (Gen. 1:28). But this is a grossly inadequate interpretation of the biblical text in question, and appears to have suppressed the biblical idea of the goodness of creation, the depiction of humans as images of God, and the biblical injunction to care and cultivate the earth

(Edwards, 2006). Such an interpretation and the attitude to the natural world that it engendered in the Christian West for centuries prompted White (1967) to remark that Christianity is the most ecologically and environmentally unfriendly religion.

It is encouraging that many Christians today adopt friendlier attitude to nature. They now see it as worthy of respect and as possessing intrinsic worth in itself. The different approaches adopted by them to communicate this reality are discussed below.

### **Kinship approach**

This approach sees all creatures as forming one community a part of which human beings are. Further, all creature are believed to have one creator who is God and father of all. This approach does not stress the preeminence of humans among other creatures of God. Some theologians have utilized this kingship approach to argue for the extension of the love of neighbour taught by Jesus (Mtt 22:37-39) to include love of other creatures understood too as our neighbours in an expanded sense. As Edwards argues, it also entails “extending the love of enemies to involve creatures that confront us as other and inspire fear in us... loving and valuing others as God loves and values them. Ultimately”, he continues, “it is a God-centred (theocentric) view of an interconnected community of creatures that have their own intrinsic worth” (pp. 24-25). This helps us to realize that we have a lot in common with other creatures of God, that our lives, as Johnson (1993) would have it, are interwoven with that of stars, sea creatures and every aspect of creation.

This approach is akin to the ethical stance of biocentrism that focuses on the common life shared by humans and the natural world, therefore seeing human beings merely as one among other creatures. By challenging the prerogative of human beings over other creatures, biocentrism teaches that all life have equal moral value and deserve equal moral consideration (DesJardins, 2013). It also acknowledges the intrinsic value of the natural world independent of their exploitation by humans (Boslaugh, 2013).

But as good as biocentrism may appear, it has been judged as morally dangerous because it undermines the biblical notion of the uniqueness and distinctness of human beings among all other creatures. “If taken in an absolute sense,” Edwards (2006) enunciates, “it fails to provide grounds for discernment between the moral value

of a bacterium and that of a human person" (p. 22). Edwards therefore surmises that, our personhood and our having been created in the image of God must be recognized and should make us realize our responsibility, as distinctive creatures called to a higher vocation, of respecting and loving other creatures.

### **Stewardship approach**

This approach goes beyond the kinship approach by not only specifying the interrelatedness of human beings with other creatures, but more so by clearly articulating human responsibility within the family - responsibility to cultivate and care for the rest of creation, employing his ingenuity and creativity (Edwards, 2006). According to French (2008), stewardship approach maintains the preeminence of human beings over the rest of creation, but with an added emphasis on the duty of care owed them. French discusses two versions of the stewardship approach, viz., anthropocentric and creation-centered versions. The anthropocentric thinking promotes a human-centered ethic that not only acknowledges humanity's primacy over the rest of nature, but also its dependency on it. The creation-centered version, on the other hand, while remaining critical of the anthropocentric version of overly emphasizing human agency and objectification of nature, argues for recognition of the rest of nature as ends in themselves, with independent dignity and value.

### **Social justice approach**

Some Christian scholars link the concern for the environment to concern for social justice. According to them, since the poor are usually the worst hit by ecological degradations, any attempt to quell or to stop such degradations is also an effort at promoting the rights of the poor and their concerns. Ecofeminists are within this group because they argue that sexism and anthropocentrism are closely linked just as the domination of women and the domination of nature are. Ecofeminists draw parallels between oppression of women and exploitation of nature, and argue for respect of the dignity of both. As MacGregor (2006) makes clear, by utilizing the concept of gender to analyze the relationship of humans to the natural world ecofeminists insist that any serious discussion on intrinsic value of creation must also address the full humanity of women. Liberation theologians are also gradually directing their reflections towards environmental concerns.

### **Pope Francis and the environment**

In the encyclical, *Laudato si*, on care for our common home, Pope Francis (2015) expresses his deepest concern for the environment, discusses in detail the social, political, economic, and ethical consequences of its neglect and destruction, as well as proffers solutions. In line with the logic of the Catholic social teaching, *Laudato si*, as Vogt (2020) understands it, proposes a strong and deep engagement with ecological problems and utilizes the resources of natural sciences, history, sociology, and political science to arrive at a broader perspective. Francis does not end at that, he also explains how the Christian faith is deeply committed to the care and preservation of nature and beckons on all and sundry to realize the “urgent need for us to move forward in a bold cultural revolution” (par. 114) to tackle the problem. Such a revolution, he is convinced, will challenge the logic of domination that has characterized much of our relationship with one another and with nature and replace it with the logic of love of God epitomized in Jesus Christ.

Pope Francis did not hide the fact that he got the inspiration to develop the theological foundations of Christian environmentalism from St. Francis of Assisi from whose canticle “*Laudato si, mi Signore*” (“Praise be to you, my Lord”) the pope got the title for the encyclical. As the pope states, through this canticle, St. Francis “reminds us that our common home is like a sister with whom we share our life and as beautiful mother who opens arms to embrace us” (par. 1). He reminds us that our bodies are composed of the dust of the earth (cf. Gen 2:2) that we abuse and plunder.

### **Ethical and spiritual roots of environmental problems**

Pope Francis is very much convinced that the environmental problems we have today are caused because of human neglect of his moral and spiritual responsibilities towards nature and towards God. What he describes as mechanistic and consumption mentality, he says, is at the root of the problems. According to him, “if we no longer speak the language of fraternity and beauty in our relationship with the world, our attitude will be that of master, consumers, ruthless exploiters, unable to set limits on their immediate needs” (par. 11). On the other hand, if human beings are able to appreciate and contemplate the beauty of creatures, they would be able to also know and appreciate God by whom all came to be (cf. Wis 13:5).

Another factor responsible for the human destruction of nature, the pope points out, is the assumption that technology is always the

solution to all problems. But this, he says, is not the case. Instead, it sometimes solves one problem and creates another. If human beings are able to control the rate of pollution, waste, and throwaway culture, they would also be able, to a greater extent, to take care of the natural world.

He also alludes to human greed and pride as drivers of the current situation. As human greed makes human beings exploit nature uncontrollably for material prosperity, human pride makes them forget their origin – God, by whom all came to exist. Pope Francis asserts that it is the forgetfulness of the preeminent place of God that has made humans arrogate to themselves absolute power, thus usurping God’s place, and using it to claim “an unlimited right to trample his creation underfoot” (par. 75). And since sin consists in the displacement of God in our lives, Pope Francis situates sin at the heart of the whole ecological issues. It disrupts the original harmony between humans, the creator, and creation. Ecological issues are therefore basically moral issues. It is the same sin, he says, that has made human beings attack nature without qualms. The way to God is to acknowledge and own up our sinful ways, repent, and restore God’s place.

The point that Pope Francis keeps coming back to is the sacramental nature of creation. He insists that nature is a free gift of God’s love just as it is a manifestation of God. “Every creature is thus the object of the Father’s tenderness, who gives it its place in the world” (par. 77). This should therefore make us see them as deserving of our loving care. The pope cites a section of the Catechism that declares the intrinsic goodness in all creatures and their reflection of divinity: “Each creature possesses its own particular goodness and perfection... reflects in its own way a ray of God’s infinite wisdom and goodness. Man must therefore respect the particular goodness of every creature, to avoid any disordered use of things” (CCC 339). Other beings are therefore not mere objects, because the whole universe has its ideal fullness in God, already attained in Jesus Christ. As manifestations of God, we seek God in our relationship with all creatures. Their ultimate purpose is not to be found in human beings. They are all matching forward “with us and through us towards a common point of arrival, which is God, in that transcendent fullness where the risen Christ embraces and illumines all things” (par. 83). Human beings, the pope says, are therefore, charged to lead all creatures back to their creator.

### **Link between ecological issues and social justice**

Ecological issues has a strong link with social issues in Pope Francis' mind. His deep concern for the poor and the connection he makes between them and the environmental crisis is palpable in the document. As Turkson (2020) succinctly puts it, the pope "links the vulnerability of the poor and the fragility of the environment" (p. ix). Pope Francis is convinced that the poor is often at the receiving end of the ecological problems. And as the environmental degradation happens unchallenged so does it bring about the worsening of the situation of the poor and "rise in the number of migrants seeking to flee from" its effects. (par. 25). According to him, we cannot allow the natural environment to deteriorate without it having a corresponding effect on the human environment for both deteriorate together.

The link between ecology and social concerns is very well articulated in his concept of integral ecology by which the pope acknowledges that "We are faced not with two separate crisis, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis both social and environmental", the solution to which requires an integrated approach that addresses "poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature" (par. 139). In such integrated approach, everyone should be involved, he says, "since the environmental challenge... and its human roots, concern and affect us all" (par. 14). He affirms, "we cannot adequately combat environmental degradation unless we attend to causes related to human and social degradation" (par. 48). Therefore there cannot be genuine attempt at care for the natural world without "fraternity, justice and faithfulness to others" (par. 70). They are all interconnected – people and the planet, plants and animals, because they came from a single creator – God.

The pontiff questions the rationale behind the quest for the preservation of the species that is not matched with a corresponding quest for the preservation of the life and dignity that we all share equally as humans. According to him, both must be taken seriously. Indeed, he argues that it is a deep concern for the welfare of our fellow human beings that should prompt our real concern for other creatures. "It is clearly inconsistent", he enthused, "to combat trafficking in endangered species while remaining completely indifferent to human trafficking, unconcerned about the poor, or undertaking to destroy another human being deemed unwanted" (par. 91). For the pope, the voice of the poor, the unborn, and the disabled must be heard in order to hear better the cry of nature itself, since they are all closely linked. That is why he

clearly states that concern for the environment cannot rightly exist with support for abortion.

Conversely, the way we treat other species, Pope Francis notes, would sooner or later be reflected in the way we treat our fellow human beings. These three, he says, are interconnected: peace, justice and preservation of creation. The bottom line of the pope's submission is that every ecological approach undertaken by any individual or state must take social concerns into consideration; the welfare of the poor and the underprivileged must be seriously thought of. *Laudato si* "therefore tackles the pressing challenges of today including not simply ecological issues but the causes of breakdown in social and community life..." (Mannion, 2020, p. 61).

The pope's further remarks that to heal our relationship with nature and environment requires healing of our interpersonal relationships, which includes our openness and relationship with God. Failure to do this, he says, would be nothing more than "romantic individualism dressed up in ecological garb" (par. 119). He therefore surmises that "There can be no renewal of our relationship with nature without a renewal of humanity itself. There can be no ecology without adequate anthropology" (par. 118).

### **The danger of false anthropocentrism**

One of the dangers that confront human beings today in their relationship with the environment is what Pope Francis terms modern anthropocentrism. This anthropocentrism seems to prize human, selfish interest over and above any other concern, technological development over any moral or ethical considerations. He laments that "Modern anthropocentrism has paradoxically ended up prizing technical thought over reality", thus compromising the dignity of the world (par. 116). Such false anthropocentrism, he maintains, easily leads to practical relativism that "sees everything as irrelevant unless it serves one's own immediate interest" (par. 122), and this only continues to bring about degradation to our environment. According to the pontiff, such practical relativism makes one take advantage of another person without qualms, see and use another as mere object to be sexually exploited, judge the elderly as disposables, and practice capitalism without restraint amidst all other sorts of crimes. It can also lead to what he terms dominant "technocratic paradigm" which he says sees maximization of profit as a sole aim in life without second thought on impact on human beings.



On account of the inherent problems associated with such misguided anthropocentrism, some people, the pope says, easily yield to biocentrism as an alternative, which again is another extreme position that, though it emphasizes the common life humans share with other creatures, fails to accord human beings the unique value they possess among them. It also robs humans of their unique and corresponding responsibility to the world – “Human beings cannot be expected to feel responsibility for the world unless, at the same time, their unique capacities of knowledge, will, freedom and responsibility are recognized and valued” (par. 118).

According to Pope Francis, correct interpretation of the Genesis account of creation should serve as a corrective to such tyrannical anthropocentrism, because the account already gives a clear-cut understanding of the place and responsibility of human beings among other creatures. God gave our First parents the injunction to “till and keep” the garden of the world (Gen 2:15). To till means to cultivate, plough, or work. To keep means to care and protect, oversee and preserve. This accords humans some responsibility over the earth, in so far as the earth also has its own responsibility to humans. It is therefore a call for mutual responsibility between humans and the earth. The pope also makes allusion to some other Old Testament passages to show that the Bible is environmentally friendly, like Deut 22:4-6 where care for birds, mother with eggs and the young is enunciated. Besides, God decreed rest for the land every 7 years in Israel (Lev 25:1-4) and Jubilee year at the end of 49<sup>th</sup> year (Lev 25:10). This, according to Pope Francis, was made to “ensure balance and fairness in their [that is, Israel’s] relationship with others and with the land on which they lived and worked” (par. 71). The Bible also shows that Sabbath rest is not only made for man but also for the donkeys (Ex 23:12. The pontiff emphasized that “Clearly the Bible has no place for a tyrannical anthropocentrism unconcerned for other creatures” (par. 68).

### **The place of Christ in ecological struggle**

Pope Francis maintains that, for there to be a revolution in our relationship with the environment, there is also a need for “a change of humanity” (par. 9). This change is what he terms “ecological conversion”; a term already employed by Pope John Paul II, as earlier noted. This conversion, according to Pope Francis, should involve profound interiority that “is essential to a life of virtue” and should not be seen as “an option or a secondary aspect of our Christian experience”

(par. 217). The ecological conversion that he advocates is also Christological conversion involving encounter with Jesus Christ, with the effects of such encounter being evidently manifest in our friendly relationship with nature on the personal and individual level, and in our social and political engagements.

Ecological conversion entails looking up to Jesus, whom Pope Francis puts forward as a model for emulation in his attitude to nature. Jesus, he stresses, is someone who is at home with nature, an attitude that made people astonished, especially as they see that even the sea and the wind obey him (Mtt 8:24). He worked with human hands as carpenter's son (Mk. 6:3). He utilizes parables that contain allusions to flowers, land, shepherd and sheep, field and cultivation, fig tree, vine vineyard, and other natural phenomena. Jesus, he says, shows God's revolutionary love in his life and ministry, and invites us "to be attentive to the beauty that there is in the world" (par. 97). Jesus' love for creation is phenomenal, and as the pope clearly points out, we must therefore respond appropriately to his call "to recognize the paternal relationship God has with all his creatures" (par. 96).

Even much deeper and truly radical, the pope notes, is the mystery of the incarnation by which heaven and earth are joined and divinity, by entering the depths of materiality, "embraces and penetrates all creation... directing us to be stewards of all creation" (par. 236). Incarnation of Jesus, he maintains, signals in a special way God's identification with the natural world. By it, "the mystery of Christ is at work in a hidden manner in the natural world as a whole, without thereby impinging on its autonomy" (par. 99). In Christ, therefore, divinity takes upon itself worldly and fleshy worries. In Jesus, divinity experiences the worldly pain and effects of human wickedness and brutality, especially by his death on the cross. By his death too, he showed stiff resistance needed by us against oppression, injustice, and domination of all kinds, including that of nature.

## **Conclusion**

The effects of climate change have had its toll on Nigeria, and have contributed to forced migration of its citizens, increased the number of internally displaced people and provided conditions that have brewed feuds and violent clashes. The author believes that part of the reasons the Fulani herders move southwards today at a rate, and with such an irregularity, never witnessed before in the history of the country is the negative impact that extreme environmental events, like drought and

desertification and other environmentally harmful human practices have on their agricultural potentials. As they move southward in search of forage for their livestock, clashes often erupt between them and farmers due to trespasses on farmlands and destruction of crops by the livestock. This has resulted in loss of lives and property and disrupted social activities of communities.

This paper is written with the conviction that religion has answers to the question of climate change. Christian environmentalism is therefore discussed in the paper as a strong force in providing not only the much-needed theological and ethical bases for integral ecology, but also the impulse and motivation to stimulate change of attitude towards nature among Nigerians. Pope Francis epitomizes this in his encyclical, *Laudato si*, a priceless document that articulates the Christian attitude to the environment and how Christian faith can offer meaning and adequate care for it. Even though the document does not stipulate concrete public responses, which is the provenance of the government, public officers, and policy makers, it however advocates for individual and systemic changes that will have a far-reaching positive impact on the environment when heeded.

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