

**REVISITING IRENAEUS' DOCTRINE OF CREATION IN THE
LIGHT OF AFRICAE MUNUS 79 – 80: TOWARDS AN INTEGRAL
HUMAN ECOLOGY**

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Abstract

This work revisits St Irenaeus of Lyons' doctrine of creation in the light of Africae Munus 79-80. The study is an attempt at addressing the problem of human ecology which does not receive much attention in global ecological discourses. Man was created in the image and likeness of God and should be the primary focus of any ecological dialogue. The paper begins with an introduction which establishes the point of our discussion and goes ahead to clarify some relevant terms. At the background of Irenaeus' doctrine is the heresy of Gnosticism which his doctrine sought to address. The origin and doctrine of Gnosticism as well as some implications are presented and Irenaeus' rebuttal is presented giving us a foundation for our ecological study. Next the background and structure of Africae Munus are presented and the focal text is highlighted and expounded. Having sought insights from other papal documents and even the African view of the human person, the work makes recommendations and comes to a conclusion.

Keywords: Creation, doctrine of creation, ecology, human ecology.

Introduction

The world today is plagued by a plethora of ecological challenges which are a direct or indirect result of human actions. Everyday new technologies emerge that reveal how creative human beings can be when given the opportunity. Developments are evident in almost every sphere of human life. Unfortunately, these developments come with new challenges. Some of these ecological challenges are climate change, deforestation, air/water pollution, land degradation, waste mismanagement and various natural disasters. However, there is no greater challenge of the world today than the problem of human ecology. The greatest disease of the modern age is the complete loss of the dignity of the human person. The human person faces grave threats to his very existence from fellow human beings who see others as objects to be used to achieve their own desires. Man occupies a unique place in creation by virtue of being created *imago Dei* – in the image and

likeness of God.¹ Man is the only creature willed by God for its own sake. This is the foundation of his inalienable dignity. Unfortunately, there is a loss of this fundamental fact today, making some people to see others as objects to be exploited and extorted. Thus, there is the need for an integral ecology that sees the human person as the center of the universe, because any authentic ecology must begin from human ecology. This work is aimed at exposing the teachings of Irenaeus of Lyons on creation and ecology, who as the first systematic theologian, was one of the first theologians to lay the foundation of what is today the Church's teaching on man in relation to the rest of creation. It seeks to formulate a proper theology of nature (eco-theology), oriented towards the recognition of man as part of, but as caretaker of nature. It also attempts to instill a sense of responsibility towards the creation whose greatest creature is the human person (human ecology). This is the focus of *Africae Munus* 79-80.

Definition of Terms

It is pertinent, *ab initio*, to clarify some important terms around which this discourse will revolve. These terms are creation, ecology and human ecology.

Creation

The word 'creation' is derived from the Latin *creare*, which means "to beget" and from the old French *creacion* (*creation* in modern French) which means "coming into being".² Theologically, it refers to God's act of bringing the world into existence *ex nihilo*- out of nothing. It expresses the way in which the world and everything pertaining to the world have their origin, ground and final goal in God. It can therefore mean, actively, the creative action of God, and passively, the totality of the world. According to Smulders:

Creation is the free act of God whereby he gives the world and man entirely to man, as a gift of his goodness and as a task to be carried on to a fulfillment in which man responds to this word of his creator with the fullness of his own being and of his world. Creation means that man is revealed as one addressed by God in such a way that the whole of reality comes to him as a word of God, summoning and inviting him to an equally total response.³

¹ Catechism of the Catholic Church, Nairobi: Pauline Publications, Africa, 1995. 355

² 'Creation', <http://en.m.wiktionary.org>, accessed 05.6.2023.

³ Smulders in Rahner, Karl (Ed). *Encyclopedia of Theology: A Concise Sacramentum Mundi*, New Delhi: Paulines, 1975, 319.

Ecology

The word “ecology” originated from the German word *Ökologie*, which is derived from the ancient Greek *οἶκος* (*oikos*) which means house, household, family or dwelling place, and also the Greek *λογία* (*logia*) which means word, language, reason or study of. It is the branch of biology that deals with the relationships of organisms with their environment and with each other.⁴ According to the Wikipedia, the term *Oecologie* was coined by the German zoologist Ernst Haeckel in 1866 in his book *Generelle Morphologie der Organismen*. In this study, we shall use the term to refer to the study of our environment and the environmental challenges facing us today.⁵

Human Ecology

The Wikipedia defines Human Ecology as an interdisciplinary and trans-disciplinary study of the relationship between humans and their natural, social, and built environments.⁶ However, the philosophy and study of human ecology has a long and complex history. It includes advances in geography, sociology, psychology, anthropology, zoology, epidemiology, public health, home economics, natural ecology, and others. For Gerald Marten, human ecology is about relationships between people and their environment. According to him, in human ecology the environment is perceived as an ecosystem. But even though humans are part of the ecosystem, it is useful to think of human - environment interaction as the interaction between the human social system and the rest of the ecosystem. The social system is everything about people, which includes their population and the psychology and social organizations that determine their behaviour.⁷

Gnosticism

Irenaeus’ doctrine of creation was a response to the heresy of Gnosticism. Thus, in order to grasp Irenaeus’ teachings on creation, it is important to have a brief look at the history and teachings of Gnosticism.

History of Gnosticism

King in her book “What is Gnosticism?” begins with the Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary’s definition of Gnosticism as “the thought and practice especially of various cults of late pre-Christian and early

⁴ ‘Ecology’, <https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/ecology>, accessed 05.06.2023.

⁵ ‘Ecology’, <https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/ecology>, accessed 05.06.2023.

⁶ “Human Ecology”, <http://www.wikipedia.org>, accessed 02.06.2023.

⁷ Gerald G. Marten, *Human Ecology: Basic Concepts for Sustainable Development* (New York: Earthscan, 2001) <https://books.google.com.ng/books>. Assessed 04/01/18.

Christian centuries distinguished by the conviction that matter is evil and that emancipation comes through *gnosis*".⁸ She then goes on to establish how defining the term Gnosticism is one of the most difficult aspects of Gnostic studies. They were one of the three main branches of early Christianity: the other two being the remnants of the Judaeo-Christian sect founded by the Apostles after Jesus' execution which was based in Jerusalem and the churches established by St Paul that later developed into mainline Christianity.⁹ Gnosticism almost disappeared by the 6th century apart from the Mandaean sect of Iraq and Iran a group that survived continuously from the 1st century CE into modern times made up of about 15,000 members who trace their origin the original Gnostic movement. However, Gnostic beliefs and practices still exist in new emerging religions in the West. Probably, the most successful of these is the Mormon Church, presently called the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS). Popular Gnostic works are: *Asclepius*, *Shepherd of Men*, *Gospel of Mary*, *Secret Gospel of John*, *Odes of Solomon*, *Codex Askewianus*, *Codex Brucianus* and the *Hymn of the Pearl*. However, one of the most important works is the *Gospel of Thomas*, which was translated into English during the late 1960s.

Gnostic Doctrine of Creation

While all world religious traditions acknowledge that the world is imperfect, they differ in the explanations they offer in order to account for this imperfection and in their suggestions to what might be the solutions to this imperfection. In a like manner, Gnosticism has its own understanding of these problems. The Gnostics believe that the world is flawed because it was created in a flawed manner. From the Gnostic perspective, there exists a true, ultimate and transcendent God, who is beyond the created universes and who never actually created anything in the true sense in which the word "create" is generally understood. However, although this True God did not fashion or create anything, he "emanated" or brought forth from within himself the substance of all that exists in all the worlds, whether visible or invisible. By implication, it may be true to assume that everything is God, since everything consists of the substance of God. On the other hand, it must also be acknowledged that many portions of that original divine essence have journeyed so far from their initial source that they have undergone unwholesome alterations during the process. Thus, worshipping the cosmos, nature, or any embodied creature is equivalent to worshipping alienated and corrupt versions of the original emanated divine essence.

⁸ King, Karen L. *What is Gnosticism?*, London: Belknap, 2005, 5.

⁹ *Ibid* 5.

According to gnosticism, the true God is unknowable. Early gnostics preferred to call him *Bythus*, which is the Greek word for depth or profundity. *Bythus* emanated or produced in some unknowable way, beings which the Gnostics called "aeons".¹⁰

While the basic Gnostic myth has many variations, they all refer to the existence of *Aeons*, who are intermediate deific beings. These are intermediaries between the ultimate, true God and us. The *Aeons* and the True God, make up the realm of fullness (*Pleroma*), which is where the potency of divinity is fully operational. This fullness of divinity stands in contrast to our own existential state, which in comparison can only be likened to emptiness. According to the Gnostic doctrine, one of these aeonial beings who is named *Sophia* (Wisdom), in the course of her journeying, emanated from her own being a flawed consciousness, that is, another being who became the creator of the material and psychic cosmos. The creation of the world according to gnostic beliefs goes like this: Sophia deeply wanted to know *Bythus*, the unknowable Father. When she could not find him or know him, she left the *pleroma* and the other 29 *aeons* in search of him after a fruitless journey in which she could not find him, she mourned that she was all alone and that she could not know God. But unknown to Sophia, her travails and sorrows had produced a being, called the "Demiurge," who would become the God of this world and of the Israelites¹¹

Demiurge is a word that is derived from the Greek word for artisan and refers to the fact that the earth is the handiwork of this being. Eventually, Sophia returned to the *pleroma*, completely unaware that a being like the Demiurge had emanated. This being, the *Demiurge*, created a flawed world because he created it in his own flawed image. This flawed being, oblivious of his origins, came to imagine himself as the ultimate and absolute God. However, because he took the already existing divine essence and fashioned it into different forms, he is called the *Demiurgos* or the "half-maker" There is another authentic half, a true deific component existing in creation, but unfortunately he is not acknowledged by the half-maker and by his cosmic minions, called the *Archons* or 'rulers'.¹²

Gnosticism, just like Buddhism, begins with the fundamental recognition that life on earth is filled with a lot suffering. In a bid to sustain themselves, different forms of life consume one other and by

¹⁰Pagels, Elaine. *The Gnostic Gospels*, New York: Vintage Books, 1979, 76.

¹¹Pavao, Paul F. *Christian History for Everyman*, www.christian-history.org, accessed 03.06.2023.

¹² *Ibid*

this means cause pain, fear, and death for one another. As if that is not enough, natural disasters such as floods, tornadoes, earthquakes, fires, drought, and volcanoes cause further suffering and pain. Human beings are very conscious of these painful characteristics of earthly existence, based on the recognition that they are sojourners in a flawed and strange world. While many religions hold that humans are responsible for the imperfections of the world, basing their view on the Genesis myth that says the transgressions of the first pair of human beings brought about a 'fall' of creation which resulted in the present corrupt state of the world, Gnosticism sees this interpretation of the Genesis myth as false. For the Gnostics, the blame for the world's imperfections lies not on human beings, but on the creator. Therefore, because for monotheistic religions the creator is God, this Gnostic position appears blasphemous.¹³

Over the centuries, different theories have arisen as a means of evading the acknowledgement of the Gnostic idea of a flawed creation and its flawed creator, but none of these arguments have satisfied the Gnostics. For example, ancient Greek thinkers such as the Platonists, advocated that people should look towards the harmony of the universe, so that by contemplating its beauty and grandeur they might forget the sufferings contained therein. However, this does not appease the Gnostics who still see nothing but flaws in this so-called harmony in the universe. Neither did the Eastern idea of Karma appeal to them, for while it may explain the chain of pain and suffering, it does not adequately account for their origin in the first place. Thus the only acceptable explanation to them is that the universe is flawed because it was created according to the image of a flawed being, the half-maker.

Implications of the Gnostic Doctrine of Creation

The Gnostic doctrine of creation has certain implications. These affect the Church's teachings on the human person, the sacraments and even her teachings on ecology. Let us x-ray these implications:

- a. For the Human Person: The Gnostic doctrine of creation contradicts in totality the Church's teaching on the human person who was created in *Imago Dei* and is able to know and love his creator. God willed man for his own sake and man alone is able to share in God's own life. This is the fundamental essence of man's creation and is the foundation of the inalienable dignity of the human person.¹⁴ From

¹³ Hoeller, Stephan A. *The Gnostic Worldview: A Brief Summary of Gnosticism*, The Gnosis Archive, www.gnosis.org, accessed 05.06.2023.

¹⁴ Catechism of the Catholic Church, 356.

the Gnostic point of view, man would be a flawed being who was made in the flawed image of a demigod. This, in clear terms, controverts the true doctrine of man as being made in God's image.

- b. For the Sacraments: Sacramental theology comes under serious attack from the doctrine of Gnosticism. This is because the Church's teaching on the sacraments is built on biblical accounts of the creation and fall of our first parents, Adam and Eve. If we are to go by the gnostic doctrine of creation, it would mean that God did not intentionally create man in his friendship and in harmony with himself.¹⁵ Thus man's fall was inevitable, based on his originally flawed nature. This would inevitably lead us to moral determinism, a pitfall we would rather not fall into. The Gnostic doctrine thus contradicts the entire doctrine of the fall, baptism which cleanses us from the originating original sin and all the other sacraments that build upon this foundation.
- c. For Ecology: The Church's teachings on ecology are built on the belief that God the Father Almighty is the creator of heaven and earth, of all that is seen and unseen;¹⁶ that the world was created for the glory of God¹⁷ and that God created the world by wisdom and love.¹⁸ God created the world out of nothing and that God needed no pre-existent thing or help in order to create the world, nor is creation any sort of necessary emanation from the divine substance.¹⁹ God created an ordered and good world because creation came forth from God's goodness and shares in that goodness of God.²⁰ Above all, God did not only create the world out of nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*), but He upholds and sustains creation (*creatio continuata*). He does not only bring creatures into existence, but also sustains them and brings them to their final end.²¹

The Gnostic doctrine of creation contravenes this fundamental doctrine of creation and thus disconnects God from His creation. Note that any ideology that disconnects the idea of God from creation can never have positive implications for ecology, because without the idea of God as the origin and sustainer of creation, who also loves His creation, human beings are relieved of any responsibility towards creation and exonerated of any violations towards the ecosystem. Therefore, the very moral principle on which

¹⁵ Catechism of the Catholic Church, 374

¹⁶ Ibid 279

¹⁷ Ibid 293

¹⁸ Ibid 295

¹⁹ Ibid 296

²⁰ Ibid 299

²¹ Ibid 301

the concept of ecology is built is destroyed and the relationship of human beings towards the earth is left to their whims and caprices.

St Irenaeus of Lyons

Biography of Irenaeus of Lyons

St. Irenaeus was born during the first half of the 2nd century. Believed to have been a Greek from Bishop Polycarp's hometown of Smyrna in Asia Minor, currently Izmir, Turkey, he was born into a Christian family and as a boy listened to Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, who had been a disciple of the Apostle John. Irenaeus moved from Asia Minor to Gaul at the time of the first Christian community in Lyons.²² During the persecution of Emperor Marcus Aurelius (161-180), Irenaeus was listed in the college of presbyters of the Church of Lyons in France. Around 177 or 178, the clergy of that city sent him to Rome with a letter to Pope Eleutherius concerning the heresy of Montanism. On return to Gaul, Irenaeus succeeded the martyr Saint Pontinus as the second Bishop of Lyons. As a bishop, Irenaeus was a man of faith and a good pastor with a good sense of proportion, a wealth of doctrine and missionary enthusiasm.²³ Irenaeus pursued two major aims: defending true doctrine from heretics and explaining the truth of the faith clearly. His major work was his Five-volume "On the Detection and Overthrow of Knowledge Falsely So-Called Gnosis", more popularly known by the shorter title of "Against Heresies" (in Latin, *Adversus Haereses*); *The Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*; as well as other fragments of his works. Irenaeus was canonized on 28th June, 1202. On 21st January, 2022, Pope Francis declared him the 37th Doctor of the Church. He would be remembered in history as the first systematic theologian.

Irenaeus' Doctrine of Creation

The central point of Irenaeus' theology is the unity of God. This is in opposition to the Gnostic belief that divides God into a number of divine *Aeons* and who distinguish between the utterly transcendent True God and the inferior Demiurge who they say created the world. Irenaeus uses the *Logos* theology which he inherited from Justin Martyr. Recall that Irenaeus was a student of the bishop Saint Polycarp, who had been tutored by St John the Apostle. John the Apostle had used the *Logos* theology in his gospel and in his first letter. Irenaeus, following the Apostle, sees the world as good which God created with His two hands. Irenaeus refers to the Son and the Holy Spirit as the two hands

²² Benedict XVI, Pope. *Church Fathers: From Clement of Rome to Augustine*, Bangalore: Asia Trading Corporation, 2007, 21.

²³ *Ibid* 22

of God. The most extensive rebuttal of Gnosticism comes from St Irenaeus of Lyons, in his masterwork, *Against Heresies*. He clearly taught creation *ex nihilo* as a defining principle of Christianity, in contrast to Gnostic speculation. He states clearly as follows:

They [the Gnostics] do not believe that God (being powerful, and rich in all resources) created matter itself, inasmuch as they know not how much a spiritual and divine essence can accomplish...For, to attribute the substance of created things to the power and will of Him who is God of all, is worthy both of credit and acceptance. It is also agreeable [to reason], and there may be well said regarding such a belief, that 'the things which are impossible with men are possible with God.' While men, indeed, cannot make anything out of nothing, but only out of matter already existing, yet God is in this point preeminently superior to men, that He Himself called into being the substance of His creation, when previously it had no existence."²⁴

Irenaeus' emphasis on the unity of God is reflected in his corresponding emphasis on the unity of salvation history. Irenaeus sees a straight connection between creation and salvation. Irenaeus continually insists that God began the world and has overseen it ever since this creative act. Thus, everything that has happened is part of God's plan for humanity. The essence of this divine plan is a process of maturation. That is, Irenaeus believes that humanity was created immature, and God envisioned his creatures to take a long time to grow into the divine likeness. For Irenaeus, Adam and Eve were created as little immature children and for him their fall was therefore not a full-blown rebellion *per se*, but rather a childish misdemeanor born out of a yearning to grow up before their time and have everything with immediacy. It was plain youth exuberance. Therefore, according to Irenaeus, everything that has happened thereafter has been planned by God to help humanity overcome this initial misfortune and work towards achieving spiritual maturity. The world has therefore been intentionally designed by God as a difficult place, where human beings are compelled to make moral decisions, because only in this way can they mature as moral agents. Irenaeus even likens death, which is seen as evil, to the big fish that swallowed Jonah. For it was only in the depths of the belly of the whale that Jonah turned back to God and acted according to the

²⁴ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Adversus Haereses*, 2.10.3-4.

divine will. Likewise, death and suffering may appear as evils, but without these evils we could never come to know God.²⁵

According to Irenaeus' theology, the high point in salvation history is the advent of Jesus. Irenaeus believed that Christ would certainly have been sent into the world, that is, even if humanity had never sinned. However, the fact that they did sin determined Christ's his role in the world as a savior. In his theology of Recapitulation, Irenaeus sees Christ as the new Adam, who systematically undid what Adam did. While Adam was disobedient to God's directive concerning the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, Christ was obedient even to the point of death on the wood of a tree. Thus, Adam was recapitulated in Christ. Irenaeus was also the first to draw comparisons between Eve and Mary by contrasting the faithlessness Eve with the faithfulness of the Mary and the disobedience of Eve with the obedience of Mary. Also, Irenaeus visions Christ as recapitulating or summing up human life. By implication, Christ underwent every stage of human life, beginning from infancy to old age, and simply by living it, he sanctified it with his divinity. However, Irenaeus argues that Christ did not actually die until he was older than it is orthodoxly presented.²⁶

Irenaeus considers that the salvation of human beings came principally about through the incarnation of the Word God as a man. Though the penalty for sin is death and corruption, God, who is immortal and incorruptible, simply by becoming united to human nature in Christ, bestows His qualities of immortality and incorruptibility on us. Irenaeus therefore understood and portrayed the atonement of Christ as realized through his incarnation rather than through his crucifixion, even though the latter event is an essential part of the former.

Africae Munus

Background and Structure of *Africae Munus*

Africae Munus is a Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation of the Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI signed at Ouidah, Benin, on November 19, 2011. It presents the results of the Second Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops which held in Rome from 4 to 25 October 2009 with the theme "The Church in Africa, at the Service of Reconciliation, Justice and Peace. 'You are the salt of the earth ... you are the light of the world' (Mt 5:13-14)". *Africae Munus* builds upon *Ecclesia in Africa*, which

²⁵Roberts, Alexander, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325 Volume I - The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, New York: Cosimo Classics, 2007, 122.

²⁶ Ibid 128

was published after the First Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops themed "The Church in Africa and Her Evangelizing Mission Towards the Year 2000: 'You shall be my witnesses' (Acts 1:8)", and provided motivation to the progress of the Church in Africa encouraging the idea of the Church as a Family of God. *Africae Munus* reinforces this ecclesial concept and outlines a programme for pastoral activity for the following decades of evangelization in Africa, emphasizing the importance of reconciliation, justice and peace.

Africae Munus is made up of an introduction, two parts and a conclusion. Part one has two chapters: (1) "In Service to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace" and (2) "Paths towards Reconciliation, Justice and Peace". Part two has three chapters: (1) "The Members of the Church"; (2) "Major Areas of the Apostolate" and (3) "Stand up, take your mat and walk!" (Jn 5, 8)". In *Africae Munus*, the Holy Father, Benedict XVI, briefly reviews the Second Special Assembly for Africa, before going on to present its abundant fruits in the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation itself. He also identifies the purpose of *AfricaeMunus*: that of giving all the members of the People of God - bishops, priests, permanent deacons, consecrated persons, catechists and the laity - the precious treasure of "Africa's commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ" giving "a new impulse, filled with evangelical hope and charity" to the Church in Africa that she may truly become salt of the earth and light of the world.

Irenaeus' Doctrine of Creation and Ecology in the Light of *Africae Munus* 79-80

Let us begin by examining the text. *Africae Munus* 79 - 80 is sub-titled *Respect for Creation and the Ecosystem* and reads thus:

79. Together with the Synod Fathers, I ask all the members of the Church to work and speak out in favour of an economy that cares for the poor and is resolutely opposed to an unjust order which, under the pretext of reducing poverty, has often helped to aggravate it. God has given Africa important natural resources. Given the chronic poverty of its people, who suffer the effects of exploitation and embezzlement of funds both locally and abroad, the opulence of certain groups shocks the human conscience. Organized for the creation of wealth in their homelands, and not infrequently with the complicity of those in power in Africa, these groups too often ensure their own prosperity at the expense of the well-being of the local population. Acting in concert with all other components of civil

society, the Church must speak out against the unjust order that prevents the peoples of Africa from consolidating their economies and “from developing according to their cultural characteristics”. Moreover, it is incumbent upon the Church to strive that “every people may be the principal agent of its own economic and social progress ... and may help to bring about the universal common good as an active and responsible member of the human family, on an equal footing with other peoples.”

80. Some business men and women, governments and financial groups are involved in programmes of exploitation which pollute the environment and cause unprecedented desertification. Serious damage is done to nature, to the forests, to flora and fauna, and countless species risk extinction. All of this threatens the entire ecosystem and consequently the survival of humanity. I call upon the Church in Africa to encourage political leaders to protect such fundamental goods as land and water for the human life of present and future generations and for peace between peoples.

From the above, Pope Benedict XVI highlights the issues of human ecology which stem from social injustice. This has given rise to a world economy in which the individual rights of people are sacrificed for the sake of a privileged few. This is an unfortunate contradiction of the dignity of the human person to whom Christ was united in his incarnation in order to save. The fundamental and inalienable dignity of the human person drawn from Irenaeus' theology is our union with Christ. This union, which came to fruition in the incarnation, restored to us the dignity which was lost after the fall of our first parents Adam and Eve, because Christ went through every stage of human life, from infancy to old age, and simply by living it, sanctified it with his divinity. While for the Gnostics, creation is totally and permanently flawed, and thus they fell into negative determinism, for Irenaeus, the world has been purposefully designed by God as a difficult place, where human beings are forced to make moral decisions, because it is only in this way that they can attain maturity as moral agents. One of the issues pointed out by the Holy Father is the chronic poverty experienced by from Africans due to the exploitation and embezzlement of public funds by political leaders who do not have the interest of the people at heart. This deprives them of the right to self-determination, making it difficult for millions of people to earn decent living. Unfortunately, these drained public funds are only used to feed the opulent lifestyle of a few elite members of society. What African elite do to the masses at a continental level is what major world powers do to Africa on a global scale and at a

more sinister level. There is a deliberate effort by certain world orders to prevent Africa countries from consolidating their economies and developing at their own pace and according to their cultural methods.

Some of these powers, under the guise of coming to the aid of African countries in eliminating or alleviating poverty, offering medical aid and relief materials to conflict affected areas, actually deliberately contribute towards the problems they try to resolve. A good example is the fact that these same countries are havens for corrupt African leaders where they stash their looted funds and often escape to enjoy their ill-gotten wealth. For those countries, while maintaining a façade that says they are totally against the corruption that ravages the African continent, it is actually only about profit because their economies stand to profit from these looted monies. That is why they find it difficult to expose these looted funds and to repatriate them when necessary. Thus, they ensure the prosperity of their people at the expense of the poor and defenseless African people. The irony in all this is the same countries responsible for these ills are the champions of the global ecological concerns. While doing their utmost best to champion the cause of the preservation of the earth's green, they sponsor mining and explorations that destroy the African continent, leaving death, disaster and disease in their wake. In these countries, the preservation of animal species and defense of animal rights is of greater importance than the preservation and defense of human life on the African continent, whereas the sanctity of human life and the dignity of the human person, irrespective of race or class, should be foremost on their agenda. In the words of Pope Benedict XVI, "...the first ecology to be defended is human ecology".²⁷

Other Papal Documents on Human Ecology

The Church has always been concerned about human ecology. It has been a major topic of discussion in many papal encyclicals over the years. Let us draw a few insights from some of such documents.

In his *Centesimus Annus* of 1991, Pope John Paul II states "The ecology of nature and human ecology are deeply intertwined. Not only does injustice and abuse in one affect the other, but the response of humankind very closely decides the fate of the creation we so much love and care for. Along with care for the natural environment, we also have to care for a human ecology that provides the space for the dignity

²⁷ Benedict XVI, Pope. *Africae Munus*: On the Church in Africa in Service of Reconciliation, Justice and Peace, 19th November, 2011, <http://www.vatican.va>, accessed 02.06.2023.

and fulfillment of the human person and the good life for all according to God's plan".²⁸

In his encyclical letter *Caritas in Veritate*, Pope Benedict XVI called for the development of a human ecology built on the idea of creation as a gift. "The human being will be capable of respecting other creatures," he says, "only if he keeps the full meaning of life in his own heart. Otherwise he will come to despise himself and his surroundings, and to disrespect the environment, the creation, in which he lives. For this reason, the first ecology to be defended is human ecology".²⁹

More recently, Pope Francis, in his *Laudato Si*, stated "The human environment and the natural environment deteriorate together; we cannot adequately combat environmental degradation unless we attend to causes related to human and social degradation." (*Laudato Si* 48). He goes on to say "Today, however, we have to realize that a true ecological approach always becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor".³⁰

It is this idea that has been behind all the social encyclicals from Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* of 1891 till date. All the social encyclicals deal with the relationships between people beginning from the smallest and simplest social institution which is the family to larger and more complex ones. They try to address issues that will engender the harmonious relationship between human beings at different levels of social interaction.

Challenges to Human Ecology

Human ecology is faced with many difficulties today. The survival of the human person is suddenly coming under serious threat. Unfortunately, just like the threats to the ecosystem, the threats to the survival of human beings are of human origin. Some of the problems of human ecology today are:

²⁸ John Paul II, Pope. *Centesimus Annus*: On the Hundreth Anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*, 1st May, 1991, <http://www.vatican.va>, accessed 02.06.2023, 11.

²⁹ Benedict XVI, Pope. *Caritas in Veritate*: On Integral Human Development in Charity and Truth, 29th June, 2009, <http://www.vatican.va>, accessed 02.06.2023, 51.

³⁰ Francis, Pope. *Laudato Si'*: On Care for Our Common Home, 24th May, 2015, <http://www.vatican.va>, accessed 02.06.2023,49.

a. Violation of the Sanctity of Human Life

There are so many evils committed against human life today. We indeed live in a culture of death, where human life has little or no value at all. The world is filled with stories of the death of millions of people across the globe in wars, acts of terrorism and genocide. Some of these unfortunate occurrences are even done in the name of religion as in seen in the bloody campaign of such terrorist networks as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), *Boko Haram*, *Al Shabaab*, and *Al Qaeda*. Millions of people have died in deliberately cultured diseases and illness done in the name of population control. Banditry, kidnappings and armed robbery have contributed their own quota to the bloodshed in the world. Even the life of the unborn is under heavy threat as governments conscientiously sign into law, bills that not only legalize but also fund the abortion of unwanted babies. These among others are threats to the survival of the human species and should be a major concern for ecological discussions.

b. Violation of the Dignity of the Human Person

The human person is losing all sense of dignity in the world today as one's dignity is no longer determined by his humanness, but by his social status. Millions of people are subjected to very degrading circumstances which violate their dignity. There is a deliberate and calculated suppression of the underprivileged that in the words of the Second Vatican Council make people question the meaning of existence.³¹ This yields unimaginable anguish of many people. Sadly, the vast majority of people do not have a say in the decisions that affect their very existence, because their opinions do not matter to their leaders, who are only there to service their own agenda.

c. Commercialization of the Human Person

Human beings are exploited today and used as money yielding objects. Sometimes this is with the consent of the individuals who are forced by circumstances to yield to certain situations. Prostitution, forced labour and child abuse are some of the results of this. Many are employed and paid pittance by their employers who only see the profit made from the ventures to be for servicing their own flamboyant lifestyle. Many workers go unpaid for months and are threatened with the sack if they dare to complain. Pensioners, who have given their lives, time and energy to serve in their younger days, are left to wallow in penury for

³¹ Flannery, Austin (Ed.). Second Vatican Council: Conciliar and Post-conciliar Documents, *Gaudium et Spes*: Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1987, 4.

the rest of their lives, whereas it is their labours that got society this far. There is even a deliberated manipulation of the uneducated and disadvantaged to serve the interests of the powerful.

d. Indifference to Human Suffering

There is a great disregard for human suffering today. While, on the one hand, a few people wallow in wealth and opulence, the vast majority wallow in abject poverty and deprivation, on the other hand. The stark difference between the poor and the rich in society is very disheartening as in the same society where many find it difficult to feed, some people's garages are lined with exotic cars worth millions. In the same society where many lack basic housing, some own mansions in which they never live. In the same society where many lack potable water, some spend millions purchasing and drinking expensive wines whose taste they actually do not relish, but they buy just for effect. Imagine that in a country like Nigeria, where hundreds of thousands of internally displaced persons (IDPs) live in refugee camps where hunger and disease are common factors, billions of naira is spent by the elite on lavish parties. There is very unfortunate indifference to suffering in the world today.

e. Gender Crisis

Another very sad development to the problem of human ecology is the gender crisis faced by the world today that has seen the rise of such things as homosexuality and transgenderism. These evils, which in the past would have been unheard of, are celebrated today across the world. Governments sign into law, bills that not only protect but encourage these acts. Many people go into same sex unions that have no reproductive value, making sex the sole aim of their relationships. Ironically, some of these people still want to adopt children born by those who had normal sexual relations as their own children. Millions of dollars are spent every year by people who feel dissatisfied with their divinely assigned gender and prefer to undergo transsexual surgeries to change their sex. These are a direct affront on human sexuality, deliberately designed by God, who created them male and female, and willed them for each other and in marriage unites them in such a way that by forming one flesh, they can transmit human life. In this way they cooperate in the Creator's work.³²

³² Catechism of the Catholic Church, 379

7. The Human Person in African Culture

Emeghara identifies three sources of the dignity of the human person in African culture as follows:

a. Human Dignity in Creation

In African creation stories, the human person and God are so connected that one may cease to exist without the other. For African culture, although God seen to be omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent, demanding the highest honour, God's mark is on the human person who acknowledges God's power and worships him for that. The Igbo word for human being *mmadu*, comes from two words *mma* - beauty and *ndu* - life. Thus *mmadu* means 'the beauty of life', and tells the Igbo concept of the human person. The human person maintains a close relationship with God by virtue of the *chi* in each person.³³

b. Human Dignity in Worship

The dignity of the human person is also recognized in his insatiable desire to worship God. For the average African, the day begins and ends with worship. It is impossible for an African to exist without his religion. Thus religion permeates the entire life of the African and in it is seen his strong connection with the divine from where the dignity of man flows. It is in this religion that man's dignity is best revealed because before God all men are equal.³⁴

c. Human Dignity in Communal Life

The dignity of the human person in African culture finds its greatest expression in communal life. In African tradition, no individual is complete without his community. One's family, kindred and community are very vital in his identity. There is a strong link between the individual and his community seen in the greater emphasis in the 'we' than the 'I'. Thus, in the African society, the success of one is the success of all and the failure of one is the failure of all. This connection goes beyond the world of the living to the world of the dead, as seen in the ancestral veneration of the African.³⁵

So for the African, the human person occupies a very unique place in creation, because he has God's special mark on him and this makes him have an insatiable yearning to worship the divine. He also has a strong bond with his community. The African does not exist alone. He lives in

³³Emeghara, Nkem (1993), *Theology Annual*, Vol. 14, pp.126-137.

³⁴Ibid

³⁵Ibid

the permanent consciousness that he is inseparably linked to his people, both the living and the dead.

Recommendations

- a. The issue of human ecology should occupy first place in ecological discussions. This is because the human person is paramount in God's creation and the caretaker of the rest of creation.
- b. Human life has come under serious threat due to doctrines of modernism that overemphasize the freedom of the human person at the expense of the preservation of the human species. Such doctrines should be met with the stiffest resistance.
- c. Governments should desist from passing into law those bills that threaten the very essence of our humanness. The satisfaction of the present generation is not worth the destruction of future generations.
- d. Every person has the right to self-determination. The need for every human being to be given the opportunity to acquire education and earn a decent living cannot be ignored. It is the foundation on which the peaceful and harmonious existence of society is built.
- e. There should be a calculated and consistent orientation of the people, especially the younger generations, of the fundamental principles of human relationship. Everyone has a right to live, and to live in peace.
- f. In the end, the fundamental principle that should be at the back of our minds is that every human being is created in the image of God and should be treated equally. While we may not be equal in social status, we are equal in dignity and whatever violates the dignity of one human being should be the concern of all.

Conclusion

The doctrine of creation occupies a special place in the discipline called systematic theology. This is because most of the Church's teachings are built on the fundamental doctrine of the creation as recorded in biblical accounts. In the words of Radcliff, "the doctrine of creation teaches us to see the world as created, which is to say as given. Our eyes are opened to the pure gratuitousness of being". This work emphasized the central place of man in creation, and the important role human beings play in the protection and preservation of not just the human species alone, but the rest of creation, as emphasized by *Africa Munus* 79 -80. This flows from the biblical accounts of the creation of man and the universe upon which systematic theology relies heavily for a foundation for the doctrine on creation. It is important not to forget the

underlying doctrine of creation, that human beings are part of, and not owners of creation; caretakers and not lords of creation, for creation came from God (*ex nihilo*), and was made out of love and that creation finds its final destiny in the One whence it came. Irenaeus' doctrine of creation is very vital, because it is the foundation of what is today, the Church's doctrine on creation and ecology. This is built on the Genesis account that in the beginning God created everything *ex nihilo* and that God loves His creation and continues to sustain it. It was to perfect creation that the Word of God assumed human flesh and dwelt among us, that by assuming human nature, he may save it, for "whatever is not assumed is not saved". Here lies the fundamental doctrine of human ecology.

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