



CONTEXTUALIZING LAUDATO SI' IN OGONI LAND: IMPLICATIONS FOR ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE AND RESTORATION

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Abstract

Laudato Si: On the care for our common home, is the title of Pope Francis' encyclical, released in June, 2015. *Laudato Si* means 'Praise be to you'—a clause adopted from the first line of the Pope's patron Saint, Francis of Assisi's canticle. *Laudato Si* a clarion call to care for the earth that has witnessed a devastating ecological crisis. The paper situates *Laudato Si* within the environmental context of both Ogoniland and the broader Niger Delta. Employing socio-historical and theological method of enquiry and analysis, environmental ethics, the paper discusses how Pope Francis' ecological vision provides a moral and spiritual context for environmental justice, ecological restoration and sustainable development in the region. Highlighting the key themes of integral ecology, care for creation, ecological conversion and preferential option for the poor, the paper is clear that these ideas expressed in the encyclical "speak directly to Niger Delta communities battling oil corporations." The study further argue that environmental degradation in this region is not only an ecological problem, but also a crisis of morals and values: it is at once economic, political and human rights issues. This paper uses a contextual reading of *Laudato Si* to promote the idea that all parties (the Church, government, multinational oil companies, environmental activists and local communities) must work together for restoration and justice. The paper concludes and recommends, the need for ethical transformation, accountability in governance and policy formulation, as well a renewed theological engagement with environment that engenders community participation in ecological healing.

Keywords: *Laudato Si*', Environmental Ethics, Integral Ecology, Sustainable Development, Eco-theology

Introduction

The link between human beings and the natural environment has turned into certainly one of the defining issues of the twenty-first century. National and global environmental systems have been under increased pressure from industrialization, extractive economies, consumerism and weak governance over the environment. The environmental crisis is particularly acute in oil-rich parts of Africa, where natural resources have become a means not only of environmental destruction but also socio-economic misery. The case of the Niger Delta exemplifies this tragic contradiction between resource endowments; ecological disasters. The

oil-rich, biodiversity-rich Niger Delta has massively suffered from decades of environmental degradation due to oil exploration activities. The ecosystem both the environment has been destroyed e.g. oil spills, gas flaring, pipeline leakages, destruction of mangrove forests oceans, and rivers have been polluted; the livelihoods of traditional people who still rely on fishing and farming are under stress. Some of these activities have had particularly devastating ecological and human consequences for communities in Ogoniland. In 2015, the pontiff released a huge theological intervention into global environmental discourse with the publication of *Laudato Si'* Messenger. The encyclical urged immediate action on environmental stewardship that connects the similarities between ecological degradation and social injustice, poverty & human suffering. Inspired by the writings of Pere Teilhard de Chardin and demographic evolution thought, Pope Francis promoted the idea of “integral ecology,” which sees humanity, society, economy, spirituality and the environment as inter-related.

Regarding the Niger Delta, the message of *Laudato Si'* highpoints a deep-rooted infrastructure for analysing environmental deterioration as not merely a technical issue but an ethical or spiritual collapse. The encyclical has criticized systems that favour profits over the dignity of human life and ecological sustainability. It urges religious communities and governments to accept environmental stewardship and justice as a *johnnie-cum-lately*. This part of Ogoniland and associated environmental dilemma is matter of international concern for decades? The activities of multinational oil companies have sparked extensive debate surrounding ethical responsibility, corporate social responsibility and the promotion of human rights. The Ogoni, led to international prominence by environmental activist Ken Saro-Wiwa, who was later hung by the regime, and their decimated ecosystem. His fight epitomized the larger call for environmental justice and accountability in the Niger Delta. It is such circumstances that this paper intends to contextualize *Laudato Si'* in relation to Ogoniland and the Niger Delta. Highlights the key themes of ecology, justice and human dignity in the encyclical which can help restore nature and achieve sustainable development in the region. It also explores the theological importance of environmental ethics for responding to ecological crises in Africa.

Laudato Si': Reviews and Theological Support

The Canticum of Pope Francis of Assisi: praise be to you, with the title: *Laudato Si'*: On the care for our common home (see Wells 2008, p. 128), Its sub-title— “On care for our common home” references the Earth. The letter, sacred in nature, is a message directed towards the world at large and also Christendom specifically. Is the Pope wondering: Haven't we witnessed the effects of these long-lasting, still oozing wounds? The famine? The poverty? The chemical and nuclear accidents? The minor conflicts and mass deaths in so many regions of the world? We have witnessed all these calamities; do we ask only: who is to blame? ...We are to blame, directly and indirectly. We are, all of us, straggling through the world (Maathai after United Nations, 1994: p.1) Pope Francis speaks about climate change and ecology in his 2015 Encyclical as both a call for renewal of dialogue and co-responsibility, in face of the threats to the environment caused by human activities. Environmental degradation is, of course, a universal and interreligious issue that lies in the religious belief of God's work and obligation for human beings to serve the Earth. Such is the setting of eco- theology between religions. Six chapters long, the 246-article document is a sort of rallying cry and call to arms for humanity, presenting the state of the environment as a clear and tangible crisis signal with



urgent questions about what kind of environmental legacy we intend to leave to future generations. Encouraging people globally, it reminds us that “the earth, our home, is beginning to look more and more like an immense pile of filth ... [and] ... so much in the world is sorrowing” (Francis 2015).

Article 1 & 2. The world of creation is mournful and in agony, therefore *Laudato Si* urges to devote an effort to the preservation of eco-system. Based on the increasing global consciousness regarding environmental issues and the resulting threatening challenges; the Pope, however, still upholds that with Christ's calling there comes sober retreat by men and women in order that they would collectively act as servants of creation, entering into a new beginning of renewed relationships with their common home. The humans have the ability to heal what they once hurt, they created their own entropic wound on the planet after all. *Laudato Si* is a book that does not bend towards any particular denomination or religion. Its subject matter and nature are theological. The natural environment is depicted as wholly good, and since God is the common progenitor of all human beings, a heritage shared by all. Religious practice does not operate outside of the environment in which the doctrinal difference exists. As a Christian or religionist, you live in relationship with God, with your fellow human being and the environment.

Chapter One: “What is happening to our common home” lays out the latest scientific understanding in order to listen for the cry from creation, to be “painfully aware, being daring enough and turning what is happening to the world into our own personal suffering and thus discovering what each of us can do about it.” Hence, it addresses “multiple aspects of the current ecological crisis”. Pollution and climate change: Climate change is a global problem of the scene, it threatens that environment social economic political and the distribution of goods in our day, it represents one of the main challenges for humanity. If “the climate is a common good, belonging to all and meant for all”, this transformation has the largest impact on the poorest, but “many of those with greater capabilities and economic or political power appear not to be concerned about slowing down climate change as much as maintaining the status quo or surpassing it with managerial advances”. Meanwhile “the inadequacy of our response to the tragedy that befalls the members of our families indicates a loss of mutuality and responsibility towards our brothers and sisters on which every civil society rests upon”. The endangered species: “Each year thousands of plant and animal species are lost forever—many which our children will never know, many which we will never see” They are not simply another exploitable ‘resource,’ but have value beyond the specific tasks they perform. At this level of perspective, “we owe it to ourselves to praise the significant attempts being done by scientists and engineers trying to solve manmade issues... but when human intervention is on behalf of finance and consumerism, far from overcoming the material problems we are actually impoverishing our earth making it poorer and greyer”. Deterioration of human quality and social destruction: the Encyclical places, in an umbrella ethics of international relationships an existing world ‘true ecological debt’, especially from North to South. There are “differentiated responsibilities” in the face of climate change, and, therefore, the developed ones have a greater. Fully aware of the deep divergences over such issues, Pope Francis makes clear that he is deeply pained by the “too weak responses” that do not measure up to the tragic nature of the situation confronting so many peoples and nations. There is no shortage of good examples, but a “complacency and a cheerful recklessness” reign.



Creation of the gospel is the name of this chapter. Confronting the challenges demonstrated in the previous chapter, Pope Francis chooses Biblical stories that give a broad perspective based on the Judeo-Christian tradition and expresses that humanity has a “very serious duty” toward creation as well as the interdependence of every living being, and adds that “the natural environment is a collective good” “the heritage of all humanity; however, it is also properly everyone's responsibility.” For the identical God who liberates and saves is also, in the Bible, precisely “the God who brought us this universe”, and “these two modalities of acting divinely are intimately related to one another”. The chaos of creation is at the heart for contemplation on the interdependence between humans and other creatures, and how sin disrupts the balance with all of creation as a whole, “these stories indicate that authentic human life is rooted in three very closely linked relationships: with God, with our neighbour and with the earth itself. External as well as internal, the Bible makes these three critical relationships severed. This rupture is sin”. To this end, ‘even if “We, Christians have sometimes misread the Scriptures, we must argue with vigour that our being made in God's image and given dominion to the earth does not provide us any reason for absolute domination of other creatures”. Human beings have the task to “‘till and keep’ the garden of the world (cf. Gen 2:15)”, realizing that “the Final End of other creatures is not ourselves. Rather, all creatures are in good motion, we and through us towards a common point of arrival which is God». That the human is not Lord of Creation ‘does not mean putting all creatures on a level and removing from man the unique value which gives rise to the immense obligation it entails’. Nor does this imply a divinisation of the earth such that we do not work on the land, nor take care of it in its fragility”. From this point of view, “one single act of cruelty on any animal is ‘against human dignity’”. Yet, “if our hearts are not tender and full of human fellowship with other human beings, then a sense of deep communion with the rest of nature cannot be real” – so I’d have to disagree over that. But what is lacking is the acknowledgment of a common communion, one world in which ALL are “called into existence by the one Father. All of us, are connected by invisible ties and together provide some cosmic family, a magnificent communion that leaves us with a sacred love and humble reverie.

Chapter Three - Human Roots of the Ecological Crisis Written in a dialogue with philosophy and the human sciences, it provides an analysis of the moment— “to think not only the symptoms but more deeply” the causes” (6). The chapter is initially heavy on reflections around technology. Gratitude for the great contribution to improve living conditions made by technologies is present. But it confers “an extraordinary ascendancy over the world and of all humanity on those with the power to control them, above all Economics”. This technocratic mindset is what causes the destruction of nature, the exploitation of humanity, and in particular its weakest and most marginalised components. More recently, “the technocratic paradigm also tends to hold sway in economics and political life,” confirming how “by itself the market cannot guarantee integral human development and social inclusion.” The anthropocentrism of modernity has reached the point that “human beings” no longer recognize their proper position towards the world and adopt a self-centred attitude, focused solely on themselves and their own power. It produces a logic of “use and throw” as an alibi for all kinds of waste, both environmental and human, that sees the other but also nature simply as an object — producing numerous forms of domination. That mentality ends up exploiting children, abandoning the elderly; ends up pushing others into slavery, human trafficking and throwing away unborn babies because they do not number with what the father and mother want, to sell “blood



diamonds” and skins of animals on the verge of extinction, overestimating how much the market can regulate itself. It is also the mentality of a host of mafias: drug-traffickers, organ traffickers. This is the context which makes the Encyclical tackle two of the most important issues concerning our world. Note the above work: “any proposal of an integral ecology, which by its very nature excludes human beings, must consider the value of work”, because “The neglecting people who are working, to pay more short-term profits is bad business for society”. The second point concerns the restrictions on scientific progress and direct reference to GMOs. This is a complex environmental issue. “Even if in some areas their use has led to economic growth which has aided recovery, a range of ‘serious persistent problems should not be understated’, beginning with the ‘concentration at the hands of a few owners of productive land.

Integral Ecology is the core of the proposals in the Encyclical as a new paradigm justice, an ecology which respects our uniqueness as human beings in this world and to our surrounding. Indeed, 'nature must not be viewed as something apart from ourselves, or just a landscape in which we reside.' This occurs in any discipline: economic and political, at every level of different cultures especially most endangered ones, and also within each moment of our lives. The integral view also incorporates the ecology of institutions: "everything is connected; many aspects of our life in society will have effects on the environment and the quality of human life. Every break of solidarity and civic friendship harms our ecology. Pope Francis gives many concrete examples to confirm his take of: «this is the reason why, as I have said in this encyclical with the participation of the Sisters Secretary and Loreto Sisters doing their significant work all over Taiwan." “We are not dealing with two crises — one environmental and the other social, but rather a single complex crisis which is both social and environmental”. Abstract: In other words, in a context “in which injustices abound and growing numbers of people are deprived of basic human rights and considered expendable”, committing oneself to the common good means making choices in solidarity — according to the teaching “human ecology is inseparable from the notion of the common good” but this must be understood concretely, that is: with an actual preferential option for the poorest of our brothers and sisters. And not only is this the best way to sustain our children in life beyond, but by proclaiming these truths and laying a path towards seeing that we ourselves care for the poor of today. Benedict XVI had already stated this emphatically: "Besides a more equitable form of inter-generational solidarity, there is also a pressing ethical requirement associated with the renewed sense of intra generational solidarity" (Caritas in Veritate 2009). Integral ecology is also about everyday life. The Encyclical devotes special attention to the setting of the metropolis. The human being possesses a high potential for adaptability and “people and groups display incredible creativity plus generosity in dealing with environmental constraints through ameliorating the effects of their environment while learning to also thrive despite chaos and anxiety regarding the uncertainty inherent in nature”

Line by line conversion with action required from us in chapter for Pope Francis elaborate analyses are not enough to the needed met. We require proposals “for dialogue and action which would engage every one of us as individuals no less than global policy”. They will “help save us from the self-destructive spiral in which we are currently trapped”. Pope Francis it is obligatory that any proposals are not in an ideological, superficial or reductionistic way. Dialogue is necessary for this, and it is something that appears in the title of each subsection of this chapter. There are, of course, environmental issues on which finding a wide

consensus is not simple. The Church does not claim to answer questions of science, and does not take the place of politics. But this should prompt an honest, open debate — one where special interests or ideologies do not remain in the way of the common good. Pope Francis is here unafraid to deal with international dynamics harshly: "World Summit after World Summit, on the environment, have failed to make our expectations come true: 'Ultimate resourcing at best can still be more rhetoric than action because political will in practice finds it inconvenient to reach truly meaningful and effective global agreements regarding the environment.'" In this fifth chapter, Pope Francis contends (amongst other issues) that honest and transparent processes of decision-making must be developed to "discern" the policies and business initiatives which will bring about "genuine integral development."

The last chapter is devoted to issues of ecological education and spirituality. It is a welcome to the centre of ecological conversion. Habits change and behaviours can be reshaped, but the roots of the cultural crisis are deep. The prerequisites for change, in terms of education and skills building: "Without motivation and a process of education, it is impossible to change". It involves all educate sectors but is "largely at school, in families, in the media, in catechesis and elsewhere". It opens up with an ambition: to aim for a "new way of living", that also paves the way for "exercising healthy pressure on those in political, economic, and social positions". This is all there to be done when consumer choices are allowed to "alter nothing less than how businesses conduct themselves, compelling them to reckon with their suffering and production. There is a need of the hour that we cannot deny to say that environmental education is important. It can influence, on a daily basis and over time, behavioural habits such as reducing water consumption , for example, sorting waste and even "switching off unnecessary lights": "An integral ecology is made up of simple daily gestures which break with the logic of violence, exploitation and selfishness". Writing from a radically contemplative perspective also makes everything simpler: for "as believers we do not view the world from without but from within, aware of the ties with which the father has connected us with all created things. An ecological conversion can be encouraged by growing our personal, God-given talents "to greater creativity and enthusiasm".

Environmental Degradation in Ogoniland and The Niger Delta

Ogoniland has achieved global infamy as one of the key sites of environmental destruction worldwide. Ecological geneses in the area have been severe since the 1950s from oil exploration activities. Contamination of the rivers, soil and farmland has greatly deteriorated old livelihoods thereby worsening poverty. Oil spills still count as one of the greatest environmental threats in the region. Water bodies and farmlands are polluted with crude oil by pipeline leaks and breaks at various oil installations. Fishing communities see fewer fish at the market and farmers struggle with less crop yield because of polluted soil. The Niger Delta has also been greatly affected by gas flaring pollution. Consistent burning of natural gas melts out toxic chemicals in the air causing desert rain, respiratory conditions and environmental change. Environmental pollution helps explain health complications often raised by local communities. Oil pollution devastates mangrove forests that were once vital resources of ecology in the Niger Delta. The degradation of such ecosystems puts biodiversity in jeopardy and amplifies the risks of flooding and coastal erosion. Environmental degradation in the area has also produced social tensions and disputes. The perception of victimhood — both from economic and political exploitation, characterizes numerous communities. This has

led to a high militancy and prevalent insecurity within the region. The 1995 execution of the writer and activist Ken Saro-Wiwa and other Ogoni activists shone a spotlight on how even environmental activism in Nigeria could be a political minefield, one where powerful corporate interest loomed large. Their fight for a study into the ecological plight of the Ogoni people raised worldwide concern. In 2011 the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) carried out an environmental assessment of Ogoniland, finding widespread pollution and recommending decades of restoration to clean-up the damaged environment. The report also highlighted the need for a clean-up of the environment and changes to policy. (pics)

Contextual and Moral Concerns of Laudato Si

Linking its teachings with indigenous cultural and spiritual conceptions of nature is, in fact, one major step to helping make Laudato Si' more evident and humanised – arguably the most crucial for implementation in Africa. Many traditional African societies consider the earth sacred. Land is more than land; it is legacy, it is identity and it is a sacred bequest passed down through generations. In so many cultures, nature is intertwined with life in community. Hill tribes have their own relationship with the land itself; most of the time rivers, forests and mountains are linked to ancestor memory and sacred purity. It is an ancient worldview that promotes respect for nature, not necessarily due to modern scientific reason — rather, because nature is understood as part of the sacred order of being (Mbiti 1990). And this is where the role Africa and us, people of Ogoni can play such a significant part. Where the first sees humans as separate from nature, African cosmology highlights relationality. The earth does not belong to humans; humans belong to the earth. This communal ecological awareness strongly resonates with the integral ecology found in Laudato Si'. So, to put Laudato Si' into context means to realize that this is not an entirely new concept. Instead, it also re-states what many African traditions have known for centuries: The earth is not a resource, but rather a type of living reality deserving of legitimate respect.

Among its strongest features, Laudato Si' sounds less like a political speech than a moral cry. Unlike in the case of most issue, Pope Francis does not consider the ecological crisis as an ordinary problem. According to him, it represents a very deep civilizational disorder. He explained that the earth is in pain because people have become ungrateful and irresponsibly. The encyclical contends that the ecological crisis corresponds to a values crisis. We have an utter lack of restraint in our consumption, we waste precious resources, we perceive nature as something to be used. This culture of exploitation results what Pope Francis denotes as the “culture of waste,” in which both natural and human beings are seen as disposable (Francis, 2015). African experiences ring loud with the basic meaning of Laudato Si'. However, local communities in Nigeria are left feeling “discarded” by both government and corporations. If businesses destroy farms and rivers because of oil spills, few people get compensated. Economic interests have priority over the health of children and older people when gas flaring pollutes the air implementing thus ominous visualization. These kinds of realities show the moral aspect of environmental issues.

Laudato Si' And Environmental Justice in The Niger Delta

Laudato Si' and the realities of environmental injustice in the Niger Delta Pope Francis argues that ecological decay cannot be separated from social injustice and human suffering. This view resonates with her community, which has seen its environment destroyed without

compensation or restoration. This environmental justice notion of fairness around environmental governance and resource allocation. In the Niger Delta, many local communities feel that they carry the environmental risk but have not gained development in proportion to oil production. In this case, crucial to an understanding of the activities of transnational oil companies operating in the region, is Pope Francis' criticism of exploitative economic systems. Profit maximization has often come at the expense of ecological sustainability and human welfare. And as reviewed above, the encyclical also includes calls to accountability and dialogue among key stakeholders. Cooperative efforts among government institutions, oil companies, civil society organizations, religious institutions, and local communities are also vital to the success of environmental restoration in the Niger Delta. This way, Churches can support environmental consciousness, mobilize communities to take ethical responsibility for the environment and lead healthy communities towards action on environmental protection. Religious leaders can foster ecological change through preaching, teaching, and social action. Those pronouncements were augmented with the Pope's preferential option for the poor in *Laudato Si'* which calls upon environmental policies that prioritize affected communities. Redress should not only aim at restoration of space, but also repair in the quality of health and education, livelihoods and significant infrastructures in all resto communities. Pope Francis says to all of us, in the encyclical calling for ecological conversion: We cannot ignore it. This means, in the context of Niger Delta, alternatives to corruption and environmental pollution and resource management that exploits.

Restoration and Sustainable Development in Laudato Si

Environmental remediation in the Niger Delta represents a long-term and comprehensive commitment. But decades of ecological damage have built up and cannot be solved with half-measures or political platitudes. Community participation in remediation projects will require scientific expertise, transparency, and past collaboration. It restores contaminated water sources, degraded farmland, destroyed mangroves and polluted air. Economic activity needs to be balanced with environmental protection which is part of the sustainable development also. The policies designed for oil exploration have to undergo gradual changes that include stricter environmental laws and effective monitoring mechanisms. Your local community should be involved in environmental decision-making. Local environmental practices compliment specified knowledge generated through indigenous knowledge systems which could play a major role in ecological sustainability. Educating people is still required to spread environmental awareness. Environmental ethics should be incorporated into the curricula of schools, religious institutions and community-based organizations. Christianity can contribute by its theology and ecology as a trumpet of eco-theology and ecological spirituality. The sermons, conferences and theological institutions can shine a deeper light on our moral responsibility to creation. Sustainable development in the Niger Delta should also call for renewable energy development and diversification of the regional economy. Excessive reliance on oil, gas and minerals is also responsible for ecological fragility and economic insecurity.

Conclusion

The environmental situation in Ogoniland and the broader Niger Delta is arguably the biggest ecological and human challenge confronting modern Nigeria. Decades of oil extraction have led to environmental devastation, economic challenges, social unrest and public health



disaster for local communities. And here comes the greatness of *Laudato Si'*; it offers a profound theology and ethic to understand and grapple with these realities. It turns out that Pope Francis' call for integral ecology, environmental justice, ecological conversion and care for the poor is a helpful medicine to restore nature in the Niger Delta. The paper establishes a case for demonstrating that such degradation in the region cannot be dealt with only as a scientific or political problem, but rather has to be recognized and re-framed into an ethical/moral/spiritual crisis of our time that cries out for transformation on both individual and collective responsibility. This means that sustainable restoration will ultimately have to be part of a collaborative effort among governments, multinational corporations, producers, religious institutions, environmental activists and local communities to pursue justice and ecological healing. Thus, the experience of the Niger Delta compels both Church and society to reformulate humanity's engagement with creation through a local (Niger Delta) contextualized understanding of *Laudato Si'*. The Ogoni agenda must be bigger than clean-up, it should include elements of justice and dignity; but also, participation, accountability and sustainable development for present generations whilst providing the basis for future generation.

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