

Ecology and the quest for integrity in a broken world

Daniel Syaushwa Musondoli, s.j.

The following reflections are part of a larger contribution to the ongoing conversation concerning ecological questions and their theological significance.ⁱ That contribution was an opportunity to respond to the challenge offered by the Society of Jesus after the General Congregation 34, and the invitation from the African catholic bishops to reflect on the role of the Church in service to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace.ⁱⁱ The title of the larger work is spelled out as follow: *The Ecological Dimensions of Peace and the Church Mission. Ecology, faith, and culture from an African perspective*. The work is mainly an attempt to explore the question of ecological crisis in the broader context of the search for peace, justice and reconciliation.ⁱⁱⁱ

Drawing from the Catholic Social Thought and the cultural resources of Africa, we suggested that ecological sensitivity offers a valid entry point to deal with questions of peace in the world. Indeed, what pertains to peace, justice and reconciliation in Africa remains relevant to the larger world in its struggles to prevent, and to stop violent conflicts in order to secure and promote a peace that is based on right relationships with human and non human creatures.

The basic assumption of the present reflection is simple: ecological responsibility is not simply about restoring physical landscapes but more importantly, it is about healing and restoring relationships between human communities, nature, and God. The Church in general and the Society of Jesus in particular are taking their part in the current debate on ecological crisis. More than debating, Jesuits are seeking to draw from their living tradition as well as from the cultural contexts that they are engaged in. But how should we go about it, and can we take different points of departure reflecting the multiplicity of contexts? How do the Jesuit reflection centers work together in addressing matters of global relevance?^{iv} And how do all these actions find their place in the common mission of proclaiming faith that does justice?

1. Defining the context: regional ecological challenges in a global context

General Congregation 34 designated Africa an apostolic priority of the universal body of the Society of Jesus. By this, the Society of Jesus was acknowledging the many challenges confronting the continent and the generous response African Jesuits, together with their friends from the whole world, envision on daily basis.

In the media, the African continent has often been described by negative images of violent conflicts that seem to give a simple picture of the reality. For many, sub-Saharan Africa has become synonym for tragedies that reclaim millions of lives every year. Very little is known about mechanisms of reversing the situation. The situation as lived from one corner to the other of the continent is so complex that it becomes difficult to identify a single cause explaining current and past tragedies, just as it is difficult to envisage a single solution that applies universally everywhere.

An ecological reflection constitutes a perspective that pays attention to both people and their material conditions, the land and its resources, that determine and partly shape their mutual relationships. It also helps to understand the ambiguous and often negative role of foreign countries

in the prospects of peaceful coexistence in Africa and other parts of the world. The relationships between what are commonly called “Western nations” and Africa, for instance, has often involved violent exploitation of natural resources with devastating consequences on both the environment and the human communities. Therefore, the ecological task will deal seriously with questions of peace, justice, healing and reconciliation. In fact, ecological crisis is not simply a set of environmental disruptions, but a reality that has moral and spiritual dimensions.

This reflection deliberately brings an African voice to the conversation, with the hope that ecology, which deals with issues of central importance for most Africans—like land, water, forests—can move from their marginal place and become central to African approach to peace, justice and human development. We hope that ecology will no longer remain the “leisure” of some developed countries that have satisfied their basic socio-economic needs as commonly heard. Rather it deals with the basic conditions of human existence, physical, social, economic, spiritual, etc.

2. Raising awareness: Nobel Peace Prizes

Three moments have worked as catalysts in my journey in addressing environmental questions. First, in December 2004, Wangari Maathai was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for her commitment to environmental protection, democratic governance, community empowerment, and peace. On receiving the Nobel Prize, Maathai commented about the relationship between peace and the environment, and between planting trees and securing harmony. She affirmed that “many wars are fought over resources, which are becoming increasingly scarce across the earth. If we did a better job of managing our resources sustainably, conflicts over them would be reduced. So protecting the global environment is directly related to securing peace.”^v Concrete actions she has initiated have showed that her conviction that when we plant trees, we plant seeds of peace and hope. Her country, Kenya, has known periods of violent conflicts over land rights and resources sharing.

There are complex connections between violent conflicts and ecological degradation. Conflicts can be both causes and consequences of ecological degradation. The connection has been affirmed by research focusing on global security and public decisions. Such studies challenge the often simplistic ways of looking at the world; they redefine real security as involving much more than simple protection against physical attack. Those studies rather relate security to *all that is necessary* for a people to live a decent life.^{vi}

Second, John Paul II’s substantial statement on ecology in his message on the world Day of Peace (January 1, 1990) should be connected to the growing commitment of many Episcopal conferences in the Catholic Church. His message “Peace with God: Peace with of Creation” stresses the worldwide ecological crisis as a moral problem and the importance of respect for nature. The opening affirmation of the statement has received increase attention from commentators:

In our day, there is a growing awareness that world peace is threatened not only by the arms race, regional conflicts and continued injustices among peoples and nations, but also by a lack of *due respect for nature*, by the plundering of natural resources and by a progressive decline in the quality of life. The sense of precariousness and insecurity that such a situation engenders is a seedbed for collective selfishness, disregard for others and dishonesty.^{vii}

This quotation and a first-hand experience of resources-related conflicts in the Great Lakes Region of Africa inspired the choice of an ambitious statement: the ecological dimensions of peace and the Church Mission. As Jesuits working in higher education gather from different horizons, they can listen to the invitation to explore, deepen, and advance the insights of the Catholic tradition and its relations to the environment and other religious perspectives on ecological issues.^{viii} In a world characterized by growing interdependence and growing insecurity, the many ecological challenges require a coordinated solution based on a morally coherent world view necessary for the development of a peaceful society, a worldview that emphasizes the need of harmony with God, with other people and with the whole creation.

The third moment corresponds to the initial call I received from the Society of Jesus about environmental commitment. In a preliminary response of the Society of Jesus to the concerns and problems that ecology includes^{ix}, we read the following:

We live in a broken world where men and women are in need of integral healing, the power for which comes ultimately from God...God's action does not begin with what we do; already, in the blessings of creation, God has laid the foundation for what he will accomplish through the graces of redemption.^x

The metaphor of brokenness and the experience described by it characterize well the context of the world today, such as the reality of brokenness in Africa that is portrayed in the media: collapsing states, violent conflicts, natural disasters, and the loss of lives and massive displacements of people within their countries and across borders. Brokenness characterizes the loss of integrity, wholeness or wellbeing; it is also the experience of all immigrants moving from one country to another, or from one continent to another. This experience does not leave any continent untouched. It is a global experience describing also the condition of developed nations where the abundance of goods fails to satisfy the quest for meaning. On a global level, it captures the inability of the world leaders to promote the world peace through mutual respect and dialogue. The fear of nuclear destruction is becoming once again a daily concern accusing the lack of integrity. Yet, there is widespread agreement that the contemporary context can be best described in terms of growing interdependence, between people, societies and nations.

Paradoxically, the disruptions of harmonious relationships go alongside a change of consciousness that happens worldwide, namely, the contribution from ecological movements around the world in advocating for a holistic understanding of reality and for relationships characterized by justice. Eco-justice represents a global challenge that requires a response from the whole Society of Jesus.

3. Globalisation: a call to solidarity

In a context of globalization, Africa calls for true and authentic friends since ecological crisis is a global question calling for a response informed by Christian faith. Its connection with the rest of the world includes shared global environmental threats like global warming.^{xi}

Globalization evokes for many a sense of proximity and belonging to an integrated world expressed in the concept of "global village." But in concrete situations, integration is contradicted by the experience of brokenness expressed in forms of disruptions between human communities, and between people and their environment. These disruptions can be so complex that they require a vision of hope to imagine alternative ways of reshaping the human-human and human-nature

interdependences. Such disruptions are experienced all around the world and, in a particular way, in the Great Lakes Region of Africa, which is the specific context implied in this reflection. The Great Lakes Region, made up of Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo offers an example of how the ecological crisis is both related to the mechanisms of economic globalization, and illustrates the intrinsic connection between the integrity of the human community and the integrity of creation. The question of peace (more accurately lack of peace) as we can guess has complex ecological dimensions in this region. The question arising out of this experience is “the question of a reality of reconciliation and reunion, of creativity, meaning and hope.”^{xii} At the last synod, the African bishops wanted to share their experiences and gather resources to live out the call rising from this context.

In the midst of tragic disruptions by which the African continent is described, raising difficult questions constitute a duty of faith where one must articulate the lament and cries of both the people and the land embodying their suffering. Unlike what is portrayed by global media, that exercise pays due attention to the destruction of the natural environment resulting from the ongoing violent conflicts and of the disruption of the whole social fabric. Similarly, the degradation of the human communities by conflicts has adverse impacts on the ecology. Both dynamics constitute real concerns for the church’s mission and an opportunity for Jesuits to get involved in networking their initiatives.

4. An illustration

In the eastern regions of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the destruction of natural ecosystems carries the marks of human suffering. From a first-hand experience in the summer of 2006, I was convinced that destruction of the natural support of life and of the source of livelihood correlate closely with the disruption of families forced to flee from their homes and from their ancestral lands, and made wanderers in their own country or forced into exile as refugees. The eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo carries also the tragic marks of the Rwandan genocide that has disrupted the human coexistence in the Great Lakes Region, and also adversely impacted the land and related resources. International and national ecologists have recently been expressing concerns about the dramatic fate of gorillas in Congolese national parks, and the threat that bloody conflicts represent for biodiversity in that country. The church and people of good will concerned with human well-being are challenged to appraise the suffering communities alienated from each other, from their lands, and from God.

Looking at these realities from the perspective of migrant populations, we cannot ignore the duty to reflect of land and resources related conflict and imagine coordinated response that draw varied experiences.

5. Ecology and the concern for justice

Generally speaking, ecological concerns are addressed from the point of view of justice “both toward the earth itself and toward the many people who are forced to live in unhealthy and undesirable conditions.”^{xiii} Similarly, a faith commitment engages the complex questions of social justice. Broadly speaking, social justice includes any question that concerns human life, such as socio-economic development, gender and racial issues, the problem of human population, and the

questions of relationships between the poor and the rich. In an ecological context, justice extends to the non-human world which provides the material conditions for social interactions.

Ecological reflection however is contextual partly because the question of justice—or injustice—is embodied differently in different places and different times. A simple example will clarify this statement. I am standing in a particular place called the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Having been placed there gives me a very particular perspective on ecological issues. The Great Lakes Region to which the Democratic Republic of the Congo belongs is known to be a nation blessed with abundant natural and human resources. Yet, it has been marked by tragedies of recent violent conflicts which, for various complex historical reasons, now relate to the genocide in neighboring Rwanda. Being a native from the Great Lakes Region offers me a particular sensitivity to the violence that has characterized the relationships between the colonial Belgian presence in that region and the people on the one hand, and between the colonial powers and natural resources, on the other hand. These violent relationships were illustrated by the findings of the United Nations report on the illegal exploitation of natural resources and other forms of wealth in the DRC.^{xiv} The report establishes direct connections between military activities and the illegal exploitation of mineral and natural resources. The report also links illegal resource exploitation to the different armies that got involved in the “Congolese war.” The report demonstrates how, from the three countries that directly fought the Congolese government, mineral exports increased exponentially from 1998 onwards, and sustained a war cycle that lasted more than ten years from 1994 to 2006.^{xv}

Another example of the contextual character of eco-justice is given by the troubling concern of global warming, one of the clearest signs of ecological crisis and illustration of the human factor involved in the fate of the environment. In certain parts of the world, solutions to address global warming may raise the question of technological choices, reliance on non-renewable energy sources exploited in other countries, and the impact of individual choices in terms of consumption. Moderation and conversion of lifestyles and rethinking current technological models may be among the most urgent requirements for developed nations to respond to the ecological crisis.

While global warming represents the most mediated ecological question today, one major ecological concern in Central Africa today consists primarily in finding solutions to the disruptions caused by arms trade. The latter is not debated as an urgent concern for ecology in those countries where arms industry consumes an important part of the national budget and provides many people with secured jobs. Yet, the consequences of arms traffic involve a sustained cycle of violence that destroys the environment and the human capacity to live harmoniously with nature and with one another. Furthermore, developing countries need to focus primarily on structures of poverty that perpetuate an overexploitation of limited resources because of lack of off-land alternatives.^{xvi}

That is why, as we reflect on these “frontier challenges”, regional perspectives will help give the global outlook a concrete ground for action. Moreover, listening to different voices will give a more complex (that is also a more comprehensive) picture of the field where the mission of the Society of Jesus is to be lived out.

6. Final reflections

What we have shared represents one perspective among many. It is a particular way of reflecting on ecological challenges. Taking the perspective of moving populations (refugees and

internally displaced people) in the Great Lakes Regions, we suggest an ecological approach to peace, justice and reconciliation, that is, a approach that consider the material conditions that determine harmonious or conflictual coexistence of human communities.

The context where this takes place is characterized by mutual interdependence. But globalization, in its economic manifestations, embodies not only possibilities of building the world together, but also destructive processes to the environment. In these same processes, global capitalism benefits from disintegrated communities that are no longer capable of resisting forces of ecological degradation. Peace building, therefore, becomes a more complex concern when its success depends to a large extent on global processes.

In some places, economic globalization has worsened, sustained and benefited from existing conflicts for the sake of natural resources exploitation. That in turn has made the peacemaking process very complex. For that reason, I argue that ecological sensitivity must take seriously the context of conflicts and the quest for peace and justice. This task requires a proper assessment of history, and a complete analysis of the social, economic and political structures that inherited and further crystallized the inequalities and the problematic relations to the land that were introduced or exploited by colonization.

Ecological concern is one of the best examples of humanity's awareness of interdependence and interconnectedness, even when it is primarily based on the perception of common threats (global warming, pollution, etc). It likewise demonstrates how, where ecological conflicts exist, integrity and wholeness of life—human and other forms of life—are also threatened. In a particular way, an ecological approach can shed light on the complexity of peace processes in Africa and in the world, and the ambiguous relationships of the continent with the rest of the world.

In those regions where the land and its resources have been source of social identity but also place of mutual estrangement, environmental restoration is strongly dependent on the healing of the suffering communities. The celebration of peace among people depends on the “healing” of socioeconomic structures that promote destructive relationships to the ecosystems.

Perspectives and suggestions for common action

Let us mention some areas that need serious consideration is we, Jesuits, are to contribute to ecological harmony. The following perspectives are inspired from the African Assistancy, but are meant to raise questions of global concern.

First, at the Province level, there exist different centers having different names but similar missions. For instance, in Zambia, the Jesuit Center for Theological Reflection (JCTR) has already engaged actions that foster social justice at the national and regional levels. The HAKIMANI Center in Kenya (Nairobi), is another Jesuit pole of reflection on certain burning questions, including advocacy. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Centre d'Etudes pour l'Action Sociale (CEPAS) constitutes another place where jesuits have taken part in issues of national interest. The last one in memory related to environmental questions was a review of mining contracts that linked China and Congo, the former being granted certain rights over Congolese minerals (and lands) with little consideration of human impact.

These centers can work like three poles of reflection and action and develop an expertise on ecological issues. They should cooperate with one another on certain questions that have regional impact on the environment and human communities.

The Jesuit Refugee Service plays a key role in resettling refugees and internally displaced persons all over the world. Recent experiences in Burundi and Rwanda shows that the land issue is among the preconditions for peaceful coexistence when people who have been estranged from their land come back and find a modified context. Many conflicts have being fought over land unequal access, although the ethnic component is presented as a major cause of enmity. How then can the JRS involve other Jesuits and the civil society in long term reflections on questions of land reform for instance? Their first hand experience can bring raw material for reflection on questions that require skills in lawmaking or the dynamics of land reforms, land tenure, land use and population movement due to violent conflicts. When possible, they can help understand the extent to which environmental resource scarcity and ecological stress contribute to political conflict.

All this could enlarge the body of knowledge and information for conflict prevention and management and promote dialogue between environmental agencies and those engaged in conflicts prevention and management. In Kenya, the Peace Institute represents an ideal academic context that can help coordinate and promote Jesuit initiatives on the ecological crisis as experienced on the continent.

An important issue for the church in Africa is the particularly sensitive issue of women, land (natural resources), and oppression. Women remain the primary victims of human violence, including in its ecological manifestations. They represent the biggest group alienated from their families and their lands, a situation that exposes them to various forms of oppression and atrocities. They form the biggest group of moving population on the African continent. They are also the first ones to experience human rights violation and neglect of human dignity. The human-ecological disruptions we have been referring to find an echo in their daily life. Therefore, responsible reflection on environment in Africa needs to attend to the question of healing and reconciliation of wounded communities. Healing is an important condition for a peaceful society. Its absence can generate violent conflicts even where natural resources are abundant. Women must be part of such processes although Jesuits would be first to take initiative.

A final aspect worthy mentioning concerns the connection between the arms race and environmental conflicts in Africa. If demilitarization of Africa is to be effective, an important step would consist in dismantling arms industries in many developed countries. Or, at least, an important work of advocacy needs to be done in those nations that produce arms and benefit from situations of restlessness in developing countries. Advocacy is one concrete illustration of the possibility of working on a global issue ecological crisis.

ⁱ We take theology in its basic definition: “fait seeking understanding”, a faith that consists in responding to God as one experiences God in one’s life, a faith that is primarily shown in the way we live and seek justice in the world.

ⁱⁱ Synod of Bishops, Second Special Assembly for Africa, *Lineamenta, The Church in Africa in Service to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace* (Nairobi, Kenya: Paulines Publications Africa, 2006).

ⁱⁱⁱ Daniel SYAUSWA, *The Ecological Dimensions of Peace and the Church Mission*. A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Licentiate in Sacred Theology. Berkeley, California, 2007.

^{iv} The initial theme of our reflection to be presented to the Mexico conference was : Ecology, eco-justice and social sustainability.

^v Wangari Maathai, *The Green Belt Movement: Sharing the Approach and the Experience*, New Expanded Edition (New York: Lantern Books, 2004), xii.

^{vi} Llyod J. Dumas, “Building security by building democracy and balanced economic relationships,” in Geoff Harris, eds., *Achieving Security in Sub-Saharan Africa: Cost Effective Alternatives to the Military* (Pretoria, South Africa: Institute for Security Studies, 2004), 75. Other resources that are relevant to this work include Chris Huggins and Jenny Clover, eds., *From the Ground Up: Land Rights, Conflict and Peace in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Pretoria, South Africa: Institute for Security Studies, 2005); Jeremy Lind and Kathryn Sturman, eds., *The Ecology of Africa’s Conflicts* introduced earlier.

^{vii} John Paul II, “The Ecological Crisis: A common responsibility.” In Christiansen, Andrew and Walter G., ed., ‘And God Saw that it Was Good’, 215.

^{viii} Drew Christiansen and Walter Glazier, eds. ‘*And God Saw that it Was Good’: Catholic Theology and the Environment* (Washington D.D.: United States Catholic Conference, 1996), 241.

^{ix} GC 34, Decree 20, 203.

^x GC 34, Decree 6, n. 14 and n. 20.

^{xi} See John Tomlinson, *Globalization and Culture* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999).

^{xii} Ibid.

^{xiii} Brennan R. Hill, *Christian Faith and the Environment: Making Vital Connections* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1998), 22. See especially 5-34, which inspire the summary I am providing in this section.

^{xiv} United Nations, Security Council, “Final Report of the Panel of Experts on the Illegal Exploitation of Natural Resources and other forms of wealth in the Democratic Republic of Congo.” [document online] S/2002/1146: available from <http://www.nisat.org/sanctions%20reports/DR%20Congo/UN%202002-10-16%20DR%20Congo.pdf> ; accessed 1 March 2007, 11.30 pm.

^{xv} From a summary on the UN Report on Illegal Exploitation of Natural Resources in the Congo. See EDC News, Environmental and Development Challenges, “DR Congo: UN Report on the Illegal Exploitation of Natural Resources,” available from <http://www.edcnews.se/Reviews/DRC-UNReport010412.html>; accessed 1 March 2007, 11.26 pm.

^{xvi} In place where the service sector is not developed well, the risk of an overdependence of farm activities is greater. Consequently natural degradation is more connected to the absence of alternatives