



The Pan-Amazonic Church Network – REPAM

“Catholic Ecology, socially and pastorally speaking, 2015”
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Beginning in 1974, I have been blessed to visit seven of the nine Amazonic countries (Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Guyana, French Guyana, Perú, Surinam and Venezuela) ... but only recently did I discover that I was actually visiting the Pan-Amazonia!

Thanks to this discovery, while looking at somewhat familiar, at the same time we are adopting an important new perspective – a social and pastoral viewpoint, as the title of this talk suggests. Further, we are challenged to keep our viewpoint comprehensive, one which embraces all and would understand all, and be completely engaged, without sacrificing any important aspect. And so to state my point most briefly, a truly Catholic ecology is an all-comprehensive and very committed ecology.

There are four components to consider: I) what is ecology? II) who will read the encyclical? III) what kind of ecology? and IV) in conclusion: Go REPAM go!

I) What is ecology? Here are four inter-related **key words**:

Environment comes from the French *virer*, “to turn” or “to veer,” and *environ* “around,” from which we get “to turn round” and finally “surroundings.” **Environment** not only refers to all the surrounding conditions that influence botanical, biological and human life but also suggests that we pay ever more careful attention to how pollution might damage them.

Ecology starts with three letters “eco” from the Greek *oikos*, which means “home or household”; and then adds *logos*, which is “discourse, meaning, sense.” So ecology is meaningful talk about our home the earth. The modern term “ecology” was introduced by the biologist Ernest Hæckel in 1869. It is the scientific study of living beings in relationship with their surroundings. Being “a wondrous work of the Creator,” the natural environment contains “a ‘grammar’ which sets forth ends and criteria for its wise use, not its reckless exploitation” (*Civ* 48).

Pope Francis, like Pope Emeritus Benedict, relates ecology to two other words beginning with more or less the same letters. **Economy** starts with *oikos* and adds *nomos*, “rule” or “law”; and **ecumenical** builds on *oikos* to become *oikoumenē gē*, “the whole inhabited world” and all its inhabitants including our descendants. The three words beginning with *oikos* imply how we should dwell and behave here on our planet – we are members of one household common to all.

Moreover, each of the four key words suggests a quality or virtue that we need in order to embrace God’s gift of nature:

environment calls for *awareness*,

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ecology enjoins *responsibility*,
economy requires *justice*, and
ecumenical hearkens to *unity*, not only global but also intergenerational.

Thus, in addition to their definitional meanings, these four key words also contain suggestive clues for appreciating Catholic social teaching on the environment. Moreover, in these four words we discover some of the inter-related dimensions of our catholic and pan-Amazonic comprehension. It is not a narrow reductionist ecology, but rather a broad, generous and deep ecology that we need in order to comprehend the whole territory. So our *eco-logos* is profoundly human, it is abundantly environmental, it is realistically economic, and it is strategically ecumenical! We are called to protect and care for both creation and the human person. These concepts are reciprocal and, together, they make for authentic and sustainable human development. To speak about the environment and ecology is to speak about a great deal!

At every Eucharist, the celebrant says, “Blessed are you, Lord God of all Creation, for through your goodness we have received the bread we offer you, fruit of the earth and work of human hands. It will become for us the bread of life.” How does this familiar prayer strike you as members and friends of REPAM? For me it expresses the dynamic relationships in which we exist and act, receive and give, pray and work. In these words we have the whole universe, the fruitful earth and a bit of bread, God’s generosity and human work and our offering ... in these words, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI would have us accept the renewed and “pressing invitation to respect the natural environment, a precious resource entrusted to our stewardship.”² Our *eco-logos* is deeply spiritual, theological, liturgical and practical (oriented towards action).

II) Who will read the long-awaited encyclical on ecology? And how should it be read?

Here is my conviction: each and every one of us needs to read the encyclical in three complementary ways: as a believer, as an inhabitant of the earth, and as the citizen of a country.

1) First then, the readers are believers. All human beings are believers. The vast majority are religious believers.³ A minority denies that they “are religious” or “have faith” or are affiliated. But all people, even these, need to take responsibility for their beliefs. So, when it comes to ecology and the Encyclical, the first way in which we read it is as believers. Climate change, human trafficking, the challenges and problems of the Pan-Amazonia are issues which engage each one’s faith or beliefs.

Written by the Catholic Holy Father and first addressed to the leaders and the members of the Church, the Encyclical will surely help us Catholics and fellow Christians to rediscover the very necessary theological and spiritual roots of our ecological concerns. Second, it will help fellow-believers in other faiths to rediscover their own religious and spiritual roots and perhaps learn from ours. Third, even those who are indifferent or hostile might appreciate such roots and hopefully understand their importance.

Some may think that faith is an optional add-on to ecological commitment. That is like saying that the foundation is an optional add-on for a building. For it is by faith we know that we are creatures, not the accidental or fortuitous products of blind forces or chance coincidences. “Mother Earth” and “Family of Man” are lovely expressions but they can remain decorative, merely rhetorical. During Lent we are especially aware of the serious obstacles to behaving as we should. What are the

² Benedict XVI, *Angelus*, 15 November 2009.

³ A comprehensive demographic study of more than 230 countries and territories conducted by the Pew Research Center’s Forum on Religion & Public Life finds that more than eight-in-ten people worldwide identify with a religious group. The report estimates that there are 5.8 billion religiously affiliated adults and children around the globe, representing 84% of the 2010 world population of 6.9 billion. (December 2012)

obstacles to genuine ecology and integral human development? Greed, short-sightedness, consumerism, selfishness, chauvinism, racism, etc., etc. Sad, but true.

It is by faith that we come to believe that we are sons and daughters of a loving Father, that we learn (slowly!) to behave like brothers and sisters to each other, that we learn (slowly!) to express gratitude for all that God has made and to exercise stewardship for it all. It is by faith that we feel connected as brothers and sisters to each other and to those still waiting to be born.

2) I turn now to “inhabitants of the earth.” The readers of the Encyclical are also inhabitants of the planet. As fellow dwellers-upon-the-earth, they should read the encyclical – for we all have to face the issues it will raise.

No inhabitant of the planet, now or in future, can say “I’m not involved, ecology doesn’t concern me, and I’m not interested.” Every inhabitant needs to get informed – in proportion, of course, to his or her capacity and situation.

Can anyone say, “I’m not a climate scientist, therefore I’m not competent in this area?” In fact, the vast majority of us are not climate scientists, nevertheless each of us does need to learn about the situation in order to fulfil our responsibilities as a believer and as an earth’s inhabitant.

For its part, science has done its best, collecting as much data as possible, collaborating amongst many specializations, pooling their competences, arriving at their consensus and giving their advice.

For example, is climate change man-made (anthropogenic)? Or is it a cyclical process of nature? Or is it probably due to both? And, whatever the causes, is there something to be done? What is not contested is that our planet is getting warmer. Indeed, the November 2014 Synthesis Report of the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, is very stark. In the words of Thomas Stocker, the co-chair of IPCC Working Group 1: “Our assessment finds that the atmosphere and oceans have warmed, the amount of snow and ice has diminished, the sea level has risen and the concentration of carbon dioxide has increased to a level unprecedented in at least the last 800,000 years.”⁴ This is the consensus of over 800 scientists of the IPCC, and represents an enormous challenge.

Now it is up to us, non-scientists and believers and earth-inhabitants that we are, to reach a conclusion and follow through.

Just like most of us, Pope Francis faces the challenge, in preparing his encyclical, of properly appreciating the scientific consensus about climate change, its causes and consequences, and the needed remedies. The world’s leading religious leader will, I believe, draw upon his faith, upon the teaching of the Church, and upon the best information and advice available, demonstrating how each of us can manage gather and sift the information, to judge, to decide and, finally, to act. And the word “act” brings us to ...

3) ... our third “reading”: we read the encyclical as citizens. Besides being a believer and an inhabitant, each of us is also the resident of a village, town, city and the citizen of a sovereign state. There are ecological tasks, and decisions to take, at each level.

When it comes to the more global issues like the oceans or the climate, such decisions are still largely made by each country. It is mainly the government of each country which decides about ecology and climate change. It is as citizens of our country that we can influence the decisions that need to be taken, and to exercise our political responsibility for those decisions.

⁴ <http://www.un.org/climatechange/blog/2014/11/climate-change-threatens-irreversible-dangerous-impacts-options-exist-limit-effects/>

The timing of the new encyclical is significant: 2015 is a critical year for humanity. In July, nations will gather for the Third International Conference on Financing for Development in Addis Ababa. In September, the U.N. General Assembly should agree on a new set of sustainable development goals running until 2030. In December, the Climate Change Conference in Paris will receive the plans and commitments of each Government to slow or reduce global warming. The months of 2015 are crucial, then, for decisions about care for or stewardship of the earth, about effective commitment to international development and human flourishing.

The last important meeting towards a climate change agreement took place in Lima. This is how Pope Francis evaluated it: “The meeting in Perú was nothing great” (15.1.15). There was no lack of scientific evidence or concrete steps proposed. But there was a desperate lack of so-called “political will”. “I was disappointed by the lack of courage; things came to a stop at a certain point.” For the decision-making needs to go well beyond the term of office of current governments and well beyond their national boundaries, and it also needs to include the needs and interests of future generations. Binding regulations, effective policies, and measurable targets are the necessary means and tools.

Never before in history have the Holy Father and the Catholic Church weighed in so explicitly on a vast global process underway. “The important thing is that there be a bit of time between the issuing of the encyclical and the meeting in Paris, so that it can make a contribution.... Let’s hope that in Paris the delegates will be more courageous and will move forward with this.”⁵

So, reading the Encyclical and facing the issues it will raise, it is citizens of a country who need to generate support – or even pressure - for the decisions our elected or appointed decision-makers need to take.

III) What kind of ecology?

If we agree that environmental language and action should avoid extremes, this raises the question: What are the proper boundaries?

Vatican II affirmed that “God intended the earth with everything contained in it for the use of all human beings and peoples.”⁶

In the early 90s, Saint Pope John Paul II gave eloquent expression to environmental concern: “People are rightly worried — though much less than they should be — about preserving the natural habitats of the various animal species threatened with extinction, because they realize that each of these species makes its particular contribution to the balance of nature in general.” He then masterfully broadened and deepened the scope: “In addition to the irrational destruction of the natural environment, we must also mention the more serious destruction of the *human environment*... Too little effort is made to *safeguard the moral conditions for an authentic ‘human ecology’*.”⁷

Pope Benedict went on to develop “the links between natural ecology, or respect for nature, and human ecology. Experience shows that *disregard for the environment always harms human coexistence*, and vice versa.”⁸

And the vital importance of human ecology rests in this: to “protect mankind from self-destruction... If there is a lack of respect for the right to life and to a natural death, if human

⁵ Gerry O’Connell, interview on the plane, 2015.01.15

⁶ *Gaudium et Spes*, § 69.

⁷ John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, § 38.

⁸ Benedict XVI, *Message*, World Day of Peace 2007, § 8.

conception, gestation and birth are made artificial, if human embryos are sacrificed to research, the conscience of society ends up losing the concept of human ecology and, along with it, that of environmental ecology” (*Civ* 51).

Indeed how could one claim to bring about peace, the integral development of peoples or even the protection of the environment without defending the life of those who are weakest, beginning with the unborn. Every offence against life, especially at its beginning, inevitably causes irreparable damage to development, peace and the environment.⁹

Divine revelation is our guide to human nature: “*Nature expresses a design of love and truth. It is prior to us, and it has been given to us by God as the setting for our life. Nature speaks to us of the Creator (cf. Rom 1:20) and his love for humanity. It is destined to be ‘recapitulated’ in Christ at the end of time (cf. Eph 1:9-10; Col 1:19-20). Thus it too is a ‘vocation.’*”¹⁰ Nature is at our disposal ... as a gift of the Creator who has given it an inbuilt order, enabling man to draw from it the principles needed in order ‘to till it and keep it’ (Gen 2:15)” (*Civ* 48).

Here is the crucial correlation: “*The way humanity treats the environment influences the way it treats itself, and vice versa... [T]he decisive issue is the overall moral tenor of society*” (*Civ* 51) eventually but inevitably affects the health of the planet. Pope Benedict’s messages on environment and ecology guide a sound understanding which consistently keeps the *human* within nature (not opposed or neglected) and gratefully acknowledges *nature* as work and gift of the Creator. What perspective could be more important than this!

The Catholic Church “is likewise conscious of the responsibility which all of us have for our world, for the whole of creation, which we must love and protect.”¹¹

In his first Easter message *urbi et orbi*, the Pope wished peace to the whole world, torn apart by ... the iniquitous exploitation of natural resources! Peace to this our Earth! May the risen Jesus ... make us responsible guardians of creation.”¹²

Now, nearly two years later, everyone should already be able to guess at the content of the Encyclical. In addition to *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis has spoken or written about this topic at least 25 times since his election. The encyclical will (i) help us to deepen our faith and spirituality, our bonds of fraternity and solidarity with all our fellow inhabitants and all future generations; (ii) help to turn our partial and fragmented knowledge into the best possible wisdom; and (iii) motivate us to act committedly in our cities, towns and villages and in our organizational, family and personal lives, with greatest political responsibility, internationally and nationally, policy-wise and economically.

IV And the conclusion: Go REPAM go!

My three readings have been filled with questions. Please allow me one more, by way of conclusion. The question is: what kind of *kairós* do the challenges of ecology and climate change put us into? “A moment of doom” we could say: man’s greed, stupidity, carelessness and pride have caused so much irreversible damage that we find ourselves at the very edge of self-destruction. Humanity destroys the planet, its only home. If we get out of this crisis alive, it will be a kind of second-best salvage operation.

⁹ Benedict XVI, *Message*, World Day of Peace 2013, § 4.

¹⁰ John Paul II, *Message*, World Day of Peace 1990, § 6.

¹¹ Francisco, *Discurso* a los representantes de las Iglesias y comunidades eclesiales y de otras religiones, 20/03/2013.

¹² Francisco, Easter Sunday, *Urbi et Orbi*, 31/03/2013.

Maybe there is another way of looking at the current moment. Until recently, nature with its powerful forces and mysterious processes, seemed to be entirely “in charge”, with the human family at its mercy, struggling to survive and eke out a living. While this is still true for the majority, the vulnerable majority, nevertheless as a whole the human family is being impelled -- by the climate crisis – to grow up and take on a new kind and level of responsibility. For the first time, in a mature way, we must exercise common responsibility for the earth, our common home. Is this our *kairós* now?

Taking the earth as a whole, the Pan-Amazonia is a big piece of it. Surely the Pan-Amazonia will require every dimension of ecology that we have seen, both human and environmental; the Pan-Amazonia will require deep *faith*, with the qualities of *awareness, responsibility, justice, unity*, not only global but also intergenerational; and the Pan-Amazonia will require powerful and prolonged commitment, and constant networking.

Before REPAM, maybe we found ourselves hampered by fragmentation and limitations, rather caught up each one in our own needs and projects, each one very busy in our own boxes and silos but generally failing to meet the measure of the challenges posed by the Pan-Amazonia in all her dimensions. Now, just as the Encyclical will call each believer, inhabitant and citizen to conversion, responsibility and action, so too REPAM is offering its participant organizations the possibility of going beyond both national and organizational limitations, and to be living the continuous conversion of the Gospel. Instead, REPAM will keep on trying to take hold of a complex and changing reality. This will take transparent communication, pooling of information, sharing of resources, ongoing collaboration.

By bringing together all people as believers, inhabitants, citizens in a great territory to face the issues which surpass the capacity of any one country, REPAM is modelling a new way of taking up our common responsibilities as believers, earth-inhabitants and citizens ... citizens, now, not just of individual countries but of larger international regions and maybe one day world citizens.

“Your presence is decisive for the future of the area,” Pope Francis said to the Brazilian Bishops in July 2013. These 10 words summarize well both his challenge to REPAM and his encouragement for the network. His and our prayer for REPAM, in his message to your first meeting in Brasilia: “May the Christian effervescence enrich the living cultures of the Amazonia and their values and make them progress.”¹³

¹³ Pope Francis, *Message sent by Secretary of State Cardinal Parolin*, 8.9.2014: “Que el fermento cristiano fecunde y haga progresar a las culturas vivas de la Amazonía y sus valores.”