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## Living in Solidarity with Nature through the Examples of the Indigenous Peoples

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**Abstract:** One of the pillars of the Catholic Church's social teachings is the Principle of Solidarity. This principle takes up its roots on the human persons as social beings, their equality in dignity and human rights and their common call towards interdependence and committed unity. Looking at the current rhetoric of the Catholic Church pertaining to environmental sustainability, having no less than Pope Francis as her main spokesperson, one is led to conclude that the Church is calling everyone to be in solidarity with one another to work for the common home, to speak for the common home and to be in solidarity with creation herself. He even accorded everyone to treat our common home like the way we treat a sick person. The Pope, in his encyclical *Laudato Si'*, invites all towards an ecological conversion and pointed towards the indigenous peoples as "the principal dialogue partners" in the issue of environmental sustainability and in considering their values and worldview on nature and environment. This essay preempts a most likely conclusion of the current papacy's direction towards how one should regard our planet, and that is through an amplified principle of solidarity, not just with other human beings but also with creation as an "other". Here, the principle of solidarity needs to transcend human relationships but also has to turn towards the relationship of the human person with Planet Earth, our common home, like the way the Indigenous peoples relate with nature.

**Key words:** Principle of Solidarity, Indigenous peoples, environmental sustainability, Church.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Planet Earth is having an upheaval and experts say that it is entering another major geological epoch. According to Robert Hazen (2012), in his book *The Story of Earth*, in its approximately 4 billion years of existence, it has undergone so many geological changes. Just before the rise of terrestrial biosphere, as how we know our planet now since about 50 million years ago, the earth has undergone a series of snowball-hothouse cycle. This means, within the period of 50 million years or so, the earth has turned very cold and ice-covered at one point and then turned into a mass of hot earth on other periods. There were about 3 cycles of these. Other writers call this greenhouse earth and icehouse earth cycle. Now, in the current state of the planet, we are supposed to be within the icehouse cycle and if we let nature run her course, the earth will be ice-covered in about 50,000 years from now. However, in 2011, Lee Kump and his group published their study comparing the deposits of CO<sub>2</sub>, methane, and other greenhouse gases from the last great global warming during the Paleocene-Eocene Thermal Maximum (PETM) which happened about 56 million years ago with the deposits from the last

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300 years or so. They found out that the amount of the greenhouse gases deposits they observed during the PETM is only tenth of the amount gathered in the past 300 years (Hazen, 2012). Humankind is “sending carbon into the atmosphere ten times faster than during the hottest period in the past 66 million years (Lavelle, 2016).” Thus, instead of going through and snowball-earth period, the planet is veering towards hothouse planet period and this is due to human driven increase of atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub>, methane and other greenhouse gases. The Global Greenhouse Warming website call this “anthropogenic climate change” because the global warming is man-made. Jenkins (2013) defines “anthropocene” as “a new geological epoch characterized by pervasive human influence throughout earth's systems.”

The Church, on her part, recognizes this and notes that humankind has partly contributing to the current global warming. Thus, looking at the current rhetoric of the Catholic Church pertaining to environmental sustainability, having no less than Pope Francis as her main spokesperson, one is led to conclude that the Church is calling everyone to be in solidarity with one another to work for the common home, to speak for the common home and to be in solidarity with creation herself. In his message last September 1, 2016 for the World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation, he even accorded everyone to treat our common home like the way we treat a sick person and regarded that caring for the environment is also part of the corporal and spiritual works of mercy. Pope Francis (2013), in his encyclical *Laudato Si'*, invites all towards an ecological conversion and pointed towards the indigenous peoples as “the principal dialogue partners” in the issue of environmental sustainability and in considering their values related with the environment as we undergo change within.

The indigenous peoples have now been recognized, not only by the Church but by the UN and more recently the 2016 Paris Agreement as communities to be protected for being the primary victims of climate change. At the same time, they are recognized as communities of resources in learning how to relate with nature in a more sustainable way. In this essay we will have a run through of the possible values that led us to the current environmental crisis and compare it with the traditional indigenous values that relate to environmental sustainability.

This essay preempts a most likely conclusion of the current papacy’s direction towards how one should regard our planet, and that is through an amplified principle of solidarity, not just with other human beings but also with creation as an “other”. This principle takes up its roots on the human persons as social beings, their equality in dignity and human rights and their common call towards interdependence and committed unity. Thus, this essay argues that the principle of solidarity, as part of the church’s social teaching, needs to transcend human relationships but also has to turn towards the relationship of the human person with Planet Earth, our common home, like the way the indigenous peoples relate with nature.

The goal of the essay is to learn from the indigenous peoples their way of being in solidarity with nature, their values and their worldviews. Since the Church’s teachings with regards to the person’s relationship with nature are apparently there, this paper proposes to push this relationship further to consider the environment more than something to nurture, but into a “someone” who is sick and in need of immediate caring and attention.

## 2. CALL FOR SOLIDARITY WITH THE ENVIRONMENT

We are in search of a “right relationship” with nature as Brown and Garver proposed in their 2009 article. They defined right relationship as “a guiding ethic for people wishing to lead fulfilling lives as creative and integrated participants in human society and the commonwealth of life as a whole.” They argue that “opting for healthy human and ecological communities is a decision we can make that will require us to find new ways to live and to run our economies” (Brown and Garver, 2009). The Holy Father, Pope Francis called this in his encyclical *Laudato Si'* as “ecological conversion.” As we work our way towards living a right relationship with one another and nature, we have to undergo the process of ecological conversion.

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The Catholic Church, through its recent pronouncement regarding the environment has raised red flags in the way we treat Planet Earth, which Pope Francis (2013) called in his encyclical *Laudato Si'* as "our common home." In the encyclical, the current pope presents a perspective that human beings are misplaced in the way we treat our planet. The Pope emphatically commented against the throwaway culture that, according to him, does not only destroy nature, but also human relationship. Because of this, the church is calling everyone to develop a different perspective towards the planet, that is, for everyone to have a very close relationship with nature through an ecological conversion.

The Catholic Church teaches in *Mater et Magistra* (1965) that the principle of solidarity takes up its roots on the human persons as social being, their equality in dignity and human rights and their common call towards interdependence and committed unity. It also serves as a social principle to help make appropriate structures, laws, regulations and juridical systems to protect human dignity and provide equal opportunity for growth and development. It also serves as a moral virtue to counteract the "structures of sins" that dominate relationships of individuals, peoples and cultures today. It is a personal commitment of the individual person to promote the common good, i.e. the good of all and every individual, with firmness and perseverance.

With this definition of the Principle of Solidarity, we can see that the way the Catholic Church views the principle of solidarity is very much limited to human interaction and relationships. Therefore, in order to put the issue of the environment on a higher scale, there is a need to apply this principle of solidarity towards creation, as someone who is in need, who is sick and someone who cannot defend her rights on her own. And in this perspective, the Catholic Church can learn a lot from the indigenous peoples in their way of relating with creation.

Since 1989, the Eastern Orthodox Church has dedicated the first day of September as Earth Day, a special day to pray for the protection of the environment. This was declared by Patriarch Bartholomew I of Constantinople. Thus, in solidarity with the Orthodox Church, Pope Francis declared September 1, 2016 as the World day of Prayer for the Care of Creation for the Catholic Church. This is a dedicated day for individuals and communities to reaffirm their personal or communal vocation as stewards of creation, to thank God for the wonderful handiwork which he has entrusted to our care, and to implore his help for the protection of creation as well as pardon for the sins committed against the world which we live (Francis, 2016).

The message has significant message that were unprecedented from the previous pronouncements of the Church pertaining to every catholic person's relationship with creation. First, Pope Francis (2016) called upon everyone to recognize and hear the cry of the earth. And each person should reflect how much he or she has contributed to the current predicament of the planet. The Pope then called all to have an examination of conscience and repent on the wrongs each has done against the earth. At this point, it is good to recall that during the time of Pope Benedict XVI two sins were added which are considered social sins. These are 1) polluting the environment and 2) promoting and using genetically modified organisms. As a consequence, Pope Francis has called upon everyone to confess our sins against the Creator, against creation and against our brothers and sisters. This is truly unprecedented. If one will check any guide for examination of conscience before going to confession, you will not find anything related to the sins against the environment. It is always the sins we have committed to God, to others and to oneself but barely, if none at all, to creation and environment.

The next unprecedented pronouncement of the Holy Father in his message was adding to the traditional list of works of mercy. Traditionally, Catholics consider seven corporal works of mercy and seven spiritual works of mercy. These corporal works of mercy were lifted from the direct teachings of Jesus: feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, provide shelter for the homeless, visit the sick and the prisoners, bury the dead and give alms to the poor. While the spiritual works of mercy on the other hand will guide every person to help ones neighbors in their spiritual needs. And these are: counseling the doubtful, instructing the ignorant,

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De La Salle University, Manila, Philippines

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admonishing the sinner, comforting the sorrowful, forgiving injuries, bearing wrongs patiently and praying for the living and the dead.

Notice that all of these works of mercy, both corporal and spiritual, are addressed to another person: sick, hungry, thirsty, naked, homeless, sick and in prison, doubtful, erring, sorrowing etc. But in the recent pronouncement of Pope Francis he invited everyone to consider caring for our common home as the eighth corporal and spiritual work of mercy. As a spiritual work of mercy, it could be in manner of contemplating with great gratitude on God's creation (LS, 214) and trying to discover a teaching which God wishes to hand on to us (LS, 85). As a corporal work of mercy, it would require every person to do simple daily gestures which break with the logic of violence, exploitation and selfishness and makes itself felt in every action that seeks to build a better world (LS, 230-231).

This proposal is unprecedented and slowly moving closer to the thesis of this essay. That is to establish relationship with the environment as the "other." The Pope said in the beginning of his message that "human beings are deeply connected with all creation. When we mistreat nature, we also mistreat human beings" (Francis, 2016).

### 3. INDIGENOUS PEOPLES AND THE ENVIRONMENT

As principal dialogue partners in environmental sustainability, Pope Francis challenges everyone to look at the way indigenous cultures and communities regard their immediate environment and the values they hold on regarding creation. In as much as the Holy Father calls everyone to protect these cultures, he also calls everyone to learn the worldview and values embedded in these small communities pertaining to the environment. Since these cultures are so closely related with their immediate environment, they are able to live in solidarity with creation.

Indigenous peoples' very deep relationship with nature as exemplified by their beliefs, spirituality, rituals etc. consider nature in its immanence and transcendence. Immanence in nature when they are able to get and harvest the fruit of the lands, sea and air for their basic physical necessities, i.e. nourishment, habitation and medication and protection. At the same time, through nature, the indigenous peoples are able to recognize a being beyond them and nature. In a sense, nature introduced the indigenous peoples towards the recognition of the sacred, and even, of a supreme being.

Indigenous peoples were able to keep all throughout the time of their existence a thoughtful balance to care for their needs and that of their immediate environment. And thus, much of the concept of sustainability as we know it now has been adapted from many indigenous communities and cultures. This is affirmed by Grim (2006) when he wrote about indigenous lifeways and four embodiments of an IP culture. He was able to present the interplay of the four embodiments or elements of an indigenous culture with regards to ecology. He gave emphasis on the connection of the person with his society or local community; his society with the larger ecological system of gift-giving towards a recognition; and this ecological system in communion with cosmological beings as presented in their rituals and narratives.

Gratani et al (2016) explored eco-centric models of relationship with the environment and conducted a study on how indigenous cultures in Australia can provide such models. What they found out is that environmental values are considered human values among the indigenous communities and their indigenous beliefs guide their respective communities in their understanding of how the natural world should be viewed and treated. As a conclusion, the team consider that holding biospheric values orientation, such as those being held by the indigenous communities they have interviewed, could contribute to the environmental sustainability in the area where one is located. Biospheric value orientation put the biosphere or the whole ecosystem on the

Presented at the 10th DLSU Arts Congress

De La Salle University, Manila, Philippines

February 16, 2017



highest values level when considering or not a pro-environment behavior. This is contrasted against egoistic value orientation which aims for personal benefits and socio-altruistic value orientation when their pro-environment behavior will benefit the people more (de Groot, 2008).

In another setting, the role of worldview and taboo among the indigenous peoples in Ghana was studied by Boamah (2015). His essay examined the role of indigenous religious beliefs and traditional cultural values such as taboos in modern-day conservation and environmental protection efforts in the country. His analysis showed that taboos, which were borne by their indigenous culture, play an indigenous role in preserving the environment. Because of these local taboos, some areas were considered sacred and thus deserves respect and care. Their beliefs in totems have also help in the preservation of birds and other animals in their region. And their conception of land and bodies of water are also sacred because this is where the sacred birds, animals and even spirits live.

In the Philippines, indigenous peoples' beliefs with regard to the environment somehow resembles what has been shared above. Philippines' indigenous peoples also hold biospheric value orientation. Their view is holistic, not just the earth and the sea but also the skies. Not only those which can be seen like animals, birds and fish, but also the unseen mythical entities. Ambrosio (2010) analyzed how the pre-Hispanic Filipinos have understood the heavens and skies and used it as their guide in their existence and development. He found out that from their ingenious studies of the skies, the early Filipinos were able to develop a concept of heavens and earth where their views, knowledge, livelihood and culture were based. He was also surprised to find out that some of the dominant features the sky such as the moon and the sun, the early Filipinos have named other dominant stars and other events such as an eclipse.

The indigenous Filipinos did not consider themselves as dominant beings on earth because they know their limits especially when the skies bring strong winds and rain. Recognizing their finite powers against natural disasters, Philippine indigenous peoples taken an awe and in the process have experienced the sacred in nature. Many Philippine indigenous groups have their own mythical figures which sometimes include a supreme being or gods and goddesses. And these beings reside in nature and sacred groves. Thus, they have developed the concept of conservation, not because the place has no economic value, but because they know their boundaries and limits within their environment. Benaggen (1996) have considered consulting with the spirits very important in the lives of the pre-Hispanic Filipinos. These consultations ended up becoming essential religious rituals and practices in resource management planning of indigenous Filipinos.

Jocano (1998) studied the different types of social organization among the indigenous Filipinos and discovered that in all layer of social organization, religion and culture is predominant. The early Filipinos' have developed a structure of rituals and worship exercise towards the deities living in nature and the souls of their departed relatives. Thus, for the indigenous Filipinos, land is sacred, land is life (Benaggen, 1996).

In a way of a summary, we can say that indigenous cultures have biospheric values orientation, that is, they consider the whole ecosystem in making decisions, in creating cultural norms and rituals and in relating with their immediate environment. They take care of it in a balanced way. They take only what they need and make sure that there is something left for the next nomadic passers-by or even for the next generation. They use natural resources without depleting them. They do not exploit but simply co-exist alongside it and in harmony with it knowing that they are part of it and if they destroy or overuse it, they do it to themselves as well.

Their lives are very much intertwined in their land. Most of the indigenous culture treat the planet like a parent and revere it accordingly and call it Mother Earth. They consider her as their beginning, their whole life and their end. "She connects them with their past (as the home of their ancestors), with the present (as provider of their material needs) and with the future (as legacy they hold in trust for their children and grandchildren)" (UNESCO, 2010).

Presented at the 10th DLSU Arts Congress

De La Salle University, Manila, Philippines

February 16, 2017



They also consider the sacredness of the land because of the other beings residing in it. Thus, for the indigenous peoples, the transcendent and the immanent meet in nature. The environment is the source of both physical and spiritual nourishment. In a sense, their immediate environment is life itself. If it is healthy, it is good for them. If it is in a bad shape, they have to take care and nurture it. Their relationship with their land is best expressed by this quote from two Datus from Southern Philippines.

God created land for the people. People die and are buried in the earth. Land, the earth, owns the people. These are sacred places. Land is a place to live in, to use and to work for its fruits and then to be buried in and thus, finally, be owned by it (Datu Dia-on and Datu Man-ukil from Banaggen, 1996).

#### 4. DEVELOPMENT OF RIGHT RELATIONSHIP WITH THE ENVIRONMENT

This paper argues that in order for every person to have a right relationship with nature, he or she must live a life of solidarity with nature, i.e. to see nature as a person and as a neighbor. Learning from what were presented earlier, we can deduce that before industrialization sets in, our indigenous peoples have always lived very closely and in solidarity with nature. Their very strong spiritual relationship with the land, earth, sea and sky has led them to live sustainably and were able to manage the natural resources responsibly. More than that, they were able to build their way of life, their culture, religion and rituals according to the space provided by their immediate environment. The indigenous peoples have developed an integrated system of knowledge that is based on their sacred relationship with nature. They have created a holistic and universal body of knowledge and value systems that promote a very personal and communal relationship with nature.

However, in the advent of colonization, westernization, industrialization and modernization, the way of life of the indigenous peoples were disrupted. New set of values system which promotes individualism, consumerism, commercialization of culture has led to unlimited extraction of natural and human resources. Coates (2003) presented these three assumptions that pervades modernity: dualism, domination and determinism. Dualism assumes that reality is fragmented and composed of inherently separate parts. Domination asserts that those in higher positions have the right to control those in lesser positions. Determinism postulates that the earth and the universe are never changing thus ushering economic determinism, unrestrained consumerism and individualism. These assumptions contradict the value system of indigenous peoples that were presented earlier: holistic view of nature where everything is interconnected, that humankind is not the dominant figure in the order of things, and that there is freedom on how one will relate with nature, i.e., freedom to care or neglect the land, freedom to stay or to move, freedom to sustain the environment for the next generations.

In our search for a right relationship between human with nature and creation, it is important to look at how humankind view nature and what value systems human beings have created around it. Miller (2005) have proposed three ways of relating with the environment based on ones underlying worldview: planetary management, environmental stewardship and environmental wisdom. Planetary management is anthropocentric and consider humankind as the most important and dominant being who were tasked to manage the world and all other forms of beings in it. According to Miller, this view focuses on how humans will benefit from the environment. Environmental stewardship on the other hand recognizes the responsibility of humankind towards preserving the earth's resources for the future generation. Finally, environmental wisdom

Presented at the 10th DLSU Arts Congress

De La Salle University, Manila, Philippines

February 16, 2017



maintains that humankind is part and completely dependent on nature and the natural resources are meant for all species, not only for human consumption. More so, this manner of relating with the environment consider the finite resources and therefore should not be wasted. This worldview towards the environment comes very close to the indigenous peoples' worldview on the environment.

Thus, combining Miller's (2005) classification of worldview on nature and environment with De Groot's (2008) environmental value orientation (egoistic, socio-altruistic and biospheric), the following modes of interaction with nature is proposed: Self AND Nature, Self IN Nature and Self IN SOLIDARITY WITH Nature.

Self AND Nature emphasizes dichotomy of the human beings with the environment. This leads to domination, extraction, exploitation and misuse of the environment, considering that nature cannot immediately protect herself from harm and destruction. This dualism brought about throwaway culture and mentality which is highlighted by consumerism and relentless violence against nature and the environment. This espouses egoistic values orientation and planetary management worldview.

In the beginning, the Church has taught in the past that human beings were given dominion over the earth (Gen 1:28). This could have encouraged this unbridled exploitation of nature by painting the human person as domineering and destructive by nature (LS, 67). With this perspective, colonizers during the middle of the second millennium, majority of which were made in the name of the Cross and the Crown, focused on the extraction of resources, both natural human as their main objectives. This race to colonize more eastern and southern territories have led to destruction of indigenous cultures, exploitation of the natural resources of the region and even slavery. Unfortunately, this mentality remained in many of our industry leaders today. Their relentless extractive mentality has led to problems of environmental sustainability and many of them consider the current global warming as hoax and unscientific.

Self IN Nature emphasizes a resolute recognition that the human person is one with nature but there is still kept a biased towards the human person. There is already a relationship but it is still a one-way relationship. One could still sense the remnant of a domineering image, albeit non-destructive, but the human person takes more at the end. These are moments where self loses itself in nature and when one is in the midst of nature and had been taken awe of it, e.g. beautiful sunset, enjoying fresh mountain air, relaxing by the beach or rivers, the nature provides. In this level there is recognition of the importance of nature but the person benefits more. This kind of relationship focuses more on the touristic or pharmaceutical value of nature but does not necessary translated towards complete dedication to protect and promote nature's well-being. The worldview is socio-altruistic and the value orientation is environmental stewardship.

We can say that the Church's teachings begun to evolved during the reign of the post-Vatican II papacy. The Church began recognizing the importance of taking care of the environment and promoted a responsible dominion over material things. To put more teeth on the current teaching, Pope Benedict XIV declared polluting the environment and using genetically modified organisms as social sins. In *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis (2013) reiterated the earlier call made by his predecessor Saint Pope John Paul II when he called every people of the planet towards an ecological conversion – a challenge to all Christian believers to not only act favorably towards nature and the environment but also to have a change of heart and change of mind in the way we relate and we treat nature and the environment. This marks the beginnings of the Church commitment towards stewardship of creation.

Presented at the 10th DLSU Arts Congress

De La Salle University, Manila, Philippines

February 16, 2017



Self IN SOLIDARITY WITH Nature focuses on the interdependent relationship between the human person and nature. This perspective goes beyond being in nature. It considers nature as a person, as neighbor. An example of this is St. Francis of Assisi who called every creation as a brother or a sister in his famous Canticle of the Sun. Since it considers nature on the right relationship, it looks deeper on its current situation and feels that one is morally obligated to protect it. Therefore, with this perspective, as a person looks at nature, he or she sees himself or herself. The person develops a very deep empathy with the travails of nature, as if one hears the pain and the cry of creation. It is as if hearing a friend in need, wailing and crying, and you sense the obligation to listen, to respond, and to heal. The worldview in this mode of interaction is environmental wisdom and the value orientation is biospheric. This mode of human interaction with nature is exactly how indigenous people relate with their environment.

Reading the current pronouncement of the Church on environmental sustainability, this is the apparent conclusion of it all, a real solidarity with nature and the whole of creation as a person. Pope Francis in message during the World Day of Prayer for the Care of our Common Home have added a new work of mercy dedicated to the care of the environment. The works of mercy are usually offered to a fellow human being, but this time the Pope went beyond that. His call to confess our sins against the environment is also revealing. Normally, we confess the sins we have committed to ourselves, to our neighbors and to God. But his time, the pope calls us to confess our sins against the environment, putting its dignity at par with human dignity.

Another critical movement in the teaching of the Church is the proper way of reading of Genesis 1:28. Human beings do not possess absolute dominion over creation, instead, they were asked to till and keep the land. Pope Francis explains in *Laudato Si'* that "tilling refers to cultivating, ploughing or working, while keeping means caring, protecting, overseeing and preserving" (LS, 67). This puts human and nature relationship into proper perspective towards mutual responsibility and inter-connectedness.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

This paper proposes that the Catholic Church's Principle of Solidarity be expanded from human relationships to include the environment since the dignity of the person is highly affected by the quality of the environment he or she lives in. And this life in solidarity with the environment has been present all along through the ways and culture of indigenous peoples. They live their lives so close with nature that for them it is clear that nature is a co-equal creation that human beings has to learn how to live interdependently with.

The essay presented the current Church's pronouncements on environmental sustainability. Also, these pronouncements were examined vis-à-vis the indigenous environmental perspectives. We have seen how the Church's teachings is going back closer to the initial experience of the indigenous peoples with regards to caring and protecting the environment. This author believes that it will be good to remember that the roots of the Judeo-Christian traditions began with the indigenous peoples in the deserts of Arabia.



Presented at the 10th DLSU Arts Congress  
De La Salle University, Manila, Philippines  
February 16, 2017



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