

From Responsible Dominion to Solidarity and Communion: A Call to Reappropriate the Principle of Solidarity

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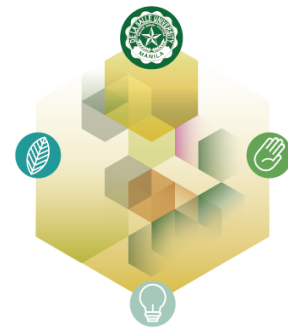
Abstract: As the Catholic Social Teachings call for the protection of all creation, it also recognizes our responsibility to dominate and subject the earth's wealth. Thus, there is a call for everyone towards responsible dominion over material goods. However, anthropocentric domination prevailed. The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church placed the current environmental crisis the world is facing today on human beings' treatment of the environment. It expresses that the problem arose through man's exercise of unconditional dominion over material things. Human beings continued to irresponsibly exploit the gifts of nature which eventually polluted it and over-extracting its resources. This is anthropocentrism, wherein the concerns of human beings and their values inform how the nature and environment should be treated. And this form of Christian anthropocentrism has contributed to the current situation. To correct this, there is a need to develop the right relationship with the environment and the whole of creation by moving from the anthropocentric ethic of responsible dominion over material things to the environmental ethic of solidarity and communion with nature. Thus, this paper proposes reappropriating the Catholic Social Principle of Solidarity to extend toward non-humans.

Key Words: Environmental Ethics; Ethics of Responsible Dominion; Principle of Solidarity; Anthropocentrism

1. INTRODUCTION

The environment is in a dire situation right now due to the unbridled greed of man in the name of progress. This is emphasized by too much individualism, consumerism, and commercialization, which led to the unlimited extraction of natural resources and even abuse of human resources. Coates (2003) describes three assumptions that pervade the current attitude toward modernization: dualism, domination, and determinism. Dualism presents a fragmented nature of reality and is composed of separate parts that may or may not relate to one another. The principle of domination over natural resources by man asserts the

Darwinian principle of survival of the fittest. That those in higher and stronger positions possess the right to manipulate and control those in lower and weaker positions. Determinism asserts that the static and unchanging nature of the environment, and even of the universe, are subjected to man's manipulation and control which eventually led us to the current economic determinism, unrestrained consumerism, and individualism. All these are also the current stance of the neoliberal economic view, which is characterized by greed and a constant desire to acquire more and more at the expense of the environment and of the poor and weak members of society. However, this kind of behavior was rightly justified by the kind of environmental ethic that man has been following, i.e., to



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dominate creation and use it for the development of humanity. This ethic calls man towards the prudent use of natural resources for the development of all humanity. This is even based on the Judeo-Christian story of creation when Adam and Eve were given the commandment to dominate the rest of creation, giving them the authority to use and subdue the rest of creation according to their need and for their development. However, as mentioned earlier, man's greed superseded man's prudence. This reality is well expressed by the words of Mahatma Gandhi: "There is a sufficiency in the world for man's need, but not for man's greed." Therefore, this kind of ethic is not enough to bridle man's greed. This paper proposes a new ethic concerning our relationship with nature, the environment, and creation. And that is the ethic of solidarity and communion.

2. THE PRINCIPLE OF SOLIDARITY

The Principle of Solidarity is part of the Catholic Social Teachings that come from the perspective of human beings as social beings. In achieving total human development, every human person needs to relate with one another to support and help each other reach their common end towards the common good. Violating this principle promotes social injustice that hinders the capacity of every human person to achieve their full potential of becoming fully developed in all aspects of their existence.

For St. Pope John Paul II, solidarity is not "a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of others. It is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good" (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, #38). According to Pope Benedict XVI, "The development of peoples depends, above all, on a recognition that the human race is a single family working together in true communion, not simply a group of subjects who happen to live side by side." (*Caritas in Veritate*, #53) From here, one can see that the principle of solidarity reminds every human being of their responsibility to be true neighbors to each other.

However, the Principle of Solidarity calls for such kind of neighborly attitude among nations and countries as well as exemplified in the following proclamations of the recent Popes:

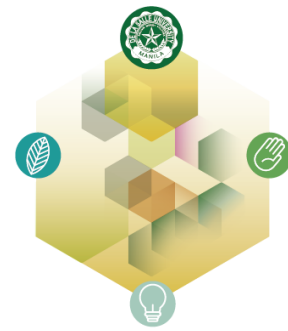
- Pope St. Paul VI proclaimed that "the duty of promoting human solidarity also falls upon the shoulders of nations." (*Gaudium et Spes*, #53).
- "Peace and prosperity, in fact, are goods which belong to the whole human race." (Pope St. John Paul II, 27)
- "Concern for our neighbor transcends the confines of national communities and has increasingly broadened its horizon to the whole world." (Pope Benedict XVI, 30)
- "In an increasingly globalized society, the common good and the effort to obtain it cannot fail to assume the dimensions of the whole human family, that is to say, the community of peoples and nations." (Pope Benedict XVI, 7)

The Principle of Solidarity does not fall only on every human being's shoulders but on every nation and country as well. Thus, the development of every human being is given to each person, reminding one another and supporting each other towards a higher goal of total human development.

Another important conclusion that we can draw from this short exposition about the Principle of Solidarity is its anthropocentric nature. It is as if attaining equity and human development depends on human beings alone, neglecting an important aspect of human development, i.e. the human family's common home, the planet, and all non-human inhabitants therein. Total human development depends much on every person's environment. And if the environment had been continuously hostile, human life might not flourish. But if it is the *Anthropos* who make the environment hostile to their very existence, human-made environmental problems ensue. Admittedly, we are now in the Anthropocene, the current epoch of the planet wherein humans become the most significant factor in the further existence of the planet.

3. CHRISTIAN ANTHROPOCENTRIC ENVIRONMENTALISM

Anthropocentrism is a belief and a social construct that views human values and experiences to



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be the sole basis humankind has by which the universe is measured and understood (Grasse, 2016). Thus, anthropocentrism claims “the idea that humankind is the most significant entity in the universe” (Grasse, 2016, p.2). ten Have and Patrão Neves (2021) defined anthropocentrism as a way to classify systems or perspectives that are centered on the human or humankind. Etymologically, it comes from two Greek words *Anthropos*, which means human, and *Kentron*, which means center. “Thus, anthropocentrism refers to the different doctrines that privilege man as the supreme being—the only being having an intrinsic, absolute, and unconditional value. It considers man as the center (as well as the beginning and end) of all thoughts and actions to whom everything else should be subordinated. Anthropocentrism has been the dominant perspective of Western religions, cultures, and philosophies” (ten Have & Patrão Neves, 2021).

But what is wrong with anthropocentrism? Hayward (1997), in his book *Anthropocentrism: A Misunderstood Problem*, argues that anthropocentrism, *per se*, is not problematic. First, he tried to distinguish between *legitimate* and *illegitimate anthropocentrism*. Legitimate anthropocentrism promotes legitimate concerns for human welfare. Whereas, illegitimate anthropocentrism is speciesism and chauvinism. He argued that failure to distinguish between the two can be counterproductive. Haywards (1997) further argued that “it is not the concern with human welfare *per se* that is the problem here, but the arbitrary privileging of that welfare over the welfare of members of other species” (p. 59). Second, Hayward (1997) argues that one can not generalize that all of humankind is anthropocentric and warns not to criticize humanity in general for actions made by a few. Third, he continued to argue that anthropocentrism is essential because, for him, the only way to prevent the ecosystem to collapse is for human beings to realize that these very ecosystems are the “life-support system” for humans themselves (Hayward, 1997, p. 60). And finally, as a consequence of the third argument, Hayward (1997) argues that caring for others the whole of creation is rooted in the love a human person has for oneself. Thus, “self-love, properly understood, can be considered a precondition of loving others” (p. 52).

However, these assumptions and views were counter-argued by Kopnina et. al. (2018). They contested that, first, appropriating anthropocentrism with speciesism and chauvinism tends to ignore

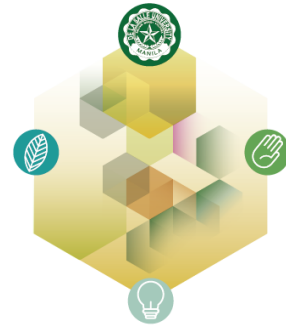
self-serving human behavior even at the risk of the environment. Second, it is true that not everyone embraces the anthropocentric view (e.g. indigenous peoples who are more closely related to ecocentrism), but it does not discount the fact that those who embrace it can significantly threaten the environment. Third, not all are aware of the role of the environment in human life and those who know and are passionate about this can make a difference. And finally, self-love alone does not necessarily translate to environmental concern and action. Kopnina et al (2018) agree then with Washington's (2013) conclusion that “anthropocentrism is a significant driver of ecocide and the environmental crisis, for society had been madly pursuing project ‘human planet’ without considering that humanity is (in the end) fully dependent on nature.” Thus, “anthropocentrism cannot lead us to a sustainable future” (Kopnina et al, 2018). This conclusion is supported by other researchers (Shkliarevsky,2021; Kidner, 2014; Washington et al, 2021; Horta, 2010).

The current thoughts on Christian environmentalism revolve around anthropocentrism. Aseneta (2017) argues that “the most common charge against the Catholic tradition’s treatment of non-human animals is that it is anthropocentric (p. 235). The current Church teachings give priority to the interests of human beings over other creatures and constantly position human beings at the center of the whole of creation and what benefits humans the most becomes the basis for making judgments (Raluto, 2015; Dorr, 2013).

This Christian anthropocentric view is not limited to Catholics. Grasse (2016) claims that the majority of various Christian traditions and denominations are anthropocentric as well. Grasse (2016) sees the anthropocentric view of various Christian denominations to be rooted at least in the following: the doctrine of *imago dei*, the doctrine of dominion over creation, the traditional interpretation of land and wilderness as an enemy of God’s Chosen people in the Old Testament and suffering and temptation of Jesus in the desert; and the soteriological emphasis on the salvation and redemption from sin that emphasizes salvation of humankind and little emphasis on the salvation of the rest of creation.

Anthropocentrism in the Catholic tradition is seen in its heavy emphasis on human dignity being more than the rest of creation (Aseneta, 2017). Thus, there develops a skewed connection between humans and the

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rest of creation. This reflects Grasse's (2016) perspective of *imago dei* and dominion over creation. More than that, Aseneta (2016) observes that it is "the traditional dualistic understanding of human nature with its sharp distinction and division between material body and rational soul wherein only in the bodily realm do humans have similarity with creation and non-human animals" (p. 236).

In addition to this, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, being influenced much by Thomas Aquinas in this perspective, wrote four paragraphs explaining the teachings concerning how to morally treat non-human animals, and the rest of creation (#2415 – 2418). Analyzing these paragraphs, Berkman (2009) concluded that the rest of nature and creatures, in general, are properties of humankind.

Having said all this, it is clear that Christian environmentalism revolves around anthropocentrism. And we also presented that many environmentalists advocate for a different ethical principle to guide human beings in relating with the rest of creation. Despite the limitation and breaks provided by the recent Popes, still, the Catholic teachings in particular, and the whole of Christianity in general, still embrace anthropocentrism as the proper ethical guide in relating with nature. And there lies the problem.

4. MODES OF HUMAN-ENVIRONMENT RELATIONSHIP

Simeon (2017) located three possible modes of relationships that humans have or might have with the rest of creation: humans AND nature, humans WITH nature, and humans IN SOLIDARITY WITH nature.

The first mode describes the ethics of ultimate domination of nature by human beings. It is highlighted by the dualistic, domineering, and deterministic appreciation of nature. It expresses the separation of humans from nature and the ultimate dominion humans have over nature and the rest of creation. This kind of ethic leads to over-extraction, over-exploitation, and misuse of natural resources, even human resources, in the guise of human development.

The second mode of relating to nature recognizes the role of human beings as their prudent stewards. This espouses the ethic of responsible

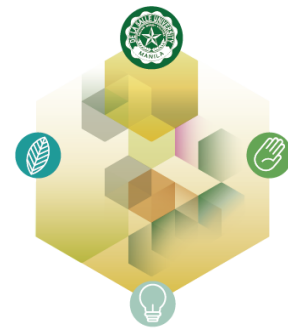
dominion over material things and goods. Humans are now called to establish a healthy relationship with nature and creation. However, this relationship is still anthropocentric. It still assumes the primacy of human beings over nature and creation, even though the awareness to be responsible and nondestructive is already there.

Finally, the third mode calls for human beings to consider nature and creation at par with their existence. In this view, humans are considered to be "first among equals." This alludes to the usual reference to the Pope's leadership in the Catholic Church and his relationship with his fellow bishops. The Pope is a bishop himself, in equal stature and dignity with his fellow bishops from across the world. However, being the Bishop of Rome, he is considered to be the 'first among equals.' Relating this concept to the human-environmental relationship, this means that the human person is both above creation and nature, and at the same time, is an equal member of the whole of creation. Human beings, being the most intelligent and free among all immanent created beings, have the role to be the first among all creation and nature, but equally creatures themselves. Thus, humans are first among equals. This kind of understanding of human beings' relationship with nature is the ethic of communion and solidarity, that is, being one with and together with creation and nature.

This paper elaborates further on the third mode and posits the need for this kind of human-environmental relationship that is based on the principle of solidarity and communion. This could be further described as the third space between anthropocentrism and ecocentrism, in which humans are seen as equal with the rest of creation; however, they are first among them.

5. NUANCING THE DIGNITY OF ALL CREATION

Using the framework presented above, this paper claims that a healthy and right relationship between humans and the rest of creation is still possible to achieve. What is required then is a real reorientation of humanity's relationship with nature and creation, their role and proper place in the order of nature and creation. The Catholic Church, through Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si'* (2015), has already provided a blueprint to approach current environmental concerns.



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His predecessors have already laid the basic foundations of this blueprint. Saint John Paul II has already called for ecological conversion and even ecological spirituality. His call challenged everyone not only to act favorably towards nature and the whole of creation but also to have a change of heart and change of mind in the way man relates with and treats creation and nature. Pope Benedict XVI, for his part, included polluting the environment as one of the social sins. And finally, Pope Francis has taken bold steps in promoting the integrity of nature and creation and renewed the call for an “ecological conversion.” He compared the current state of creation and nature to a sick person who needed care and attention. He also encouraged everyone to confess sins committed against nature and creation. To top it all, he went as far as including caring for nature and creation as one of the corporal works of mercy. Corporal works of mercy are normally done toward another human being. By doing so, Pope Francis indirectly teaches that nature and creation must be given equal dignity as that of human beings. Here is the heart of the ethic of solidarity and communion with nature and creation. Nature and creation are an 'other' with the same dignity as a human being. However human beings should learn to decenter themselves in the hierarchy of values and instead recognize their role in the preservation of the planet using their intelligence and free will. From this, the Church may now move from the ethic of responsible dominion towards the ethic of communion and solidarity.

Proposing an environmental ethic that puts the dignity of nature and creation on the same level as that of the human person is expected to produce tensions with the current social doctrine of the Church. The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, although calls for human beings to be responsible stewards of creation, still puts human beings above all nature and creatures. It affirms that human dignity is higher than that of the rest of nature and creation (#461). In the same manner, the Church teaches us to be careful in absolutizing the dignity of nature and creation to be higher than that of the dignity of the human person (#463). From here, we could see that the Catholic Church, in expressing its teaching about the environment, is still embracing the ethic of responsible dominion over material things and goods. However, prioritizing humans over the rest of creation is not absolute nor limitless (Asenetea, 2017). St. John Paul II (1987) wrote in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* that the dominion over materials things is not “an absolute power, nor one can speak of a freedom to ‘use and

misuse,’ or to dispose of things as one pleases” (#34). In the same manner, Pope Benedict XVI in *Caritas in Veritate* regarded nature to be containing a grammar placed by God “which sets forth ends and criteria for its wise use, not its reckless exploitation” (#48). Here, one can see that the Church’s anthropocentric view is not ultimate and somehow balanced, and not completely unlimited (Asenetea, 2017).

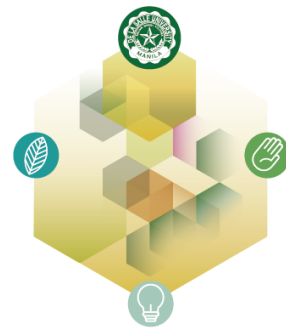
Furthermore, in *Laudato Si’* (#67), Pope Francis invites everyone to reread the story of creation in the Book of Genesis. Adam and Eve were indeed given dominion over the other creatures, but they were also told to 'till it and keep it' (Gen 2:15). Thus, according to Pope Francis, the Genesis account in Chapter 1 verse 28 has wrongly led people to conclude that humans have ultimate domination over all creation and nature. He is calling everyone to consider the original commandment, that is, to till and keep the Garden of Eden. According to him, the original commandment given to Adam and Eve was to make the land fruitful by taking care of it and everything in it. This is done by overseeing the creation, caring for it, protecting it, and preserving it. This will surely have deep implications on moral, ethical, and religious education regarding the proper disposition of humans to nature and creation.

After regarding all these, humans are given priority in the order of creation. However, this does not deny the value of the rest of creation. In this light, the way humans treat other forms of creation makes them more human and more dignified. And this is how Edwards (2008) hopes how human dignity should be understood: human dignity is best interpreted by how human beings relate with the rest of creation.

6. CONCLUSION

This essay proposes the need to change the current environmental ethic from responsible dominion to the ethic of solidarity and communion. Different modes of relationship with nature and creation were presented concerning the current environmental concerns the planet is experiencing. Among these modes, the ethic of *human beings in SOLIDARITY WITH nature*, where human beings are considered to be “first among equals” among all creation was proposed. It also discussed how this proposed mode of human-environmental relationship is better with the current teaching of the Church, i.e. *human beings WITH*

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nature, which calls for every human person to become stewards by practicing responsible dominion over the rest of creation. The essay hopes to start a conversation that will open a third space wherein the Catholic Church's teachings in developing a right relationship between humans and the rest of creation be nuanced, extended, clarified, and hopefully, changed.

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