

Indigenous People's Wisdom and the Church's Mission of Caring for the Earth: Towards Integral Ecology

Chito M. Sawit

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Abstract

Today, the world faces the challenge of ecological destruction due to global warming and climate change. The situation is made worse by massive industrialization, modernization, and urbanization, driven by insatiable capitalistic and consumeristic desires. The Catholic Church responds to the worsening ecological destruction crisis with Pope Francis as the prominent figure in this task. In 2015, with the world facing an ecological and environmental challenge, Pope Francis gave the whole world a message of caring for the earth in his Encyclical *Laudato Si'* ("On Care of Our Common Home"). The indigenous peoples are our dialogue partners in this document in caring for our planet.

Key Words: care for the earth, indigenous peoples, integral ecology, mission, wisdom

Introduction

The world, together with humanity, is facing destruction. The devastation of the planet that we are bringing about negates some hundreds of millions, even billions, of years past (Dunn and Lonergan 1991). Nonetheless, the world answers the environmental and ecological problems with "sustainable development," defined as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising future generations' ability to meet their own needs (The World Conference of Environment 1987). Indeed, caring properly for our common home, developing an integral ecology, and an ecological and cultural conversion are needed.

The Church and indigenous peoples have wisdom traditions to contribute positively and constructively towards mitigating the increasingly pressing ecological crisis. This article is about the indigenous peoples' wisdom and the Church's mission of caring for the earth towards an integral ecology. This study attempts to see the Church's contribution and the indigenous peoples in the care for our common home. The article is not exhaustive and comprehensive, though it attempts to see the common ways of the indigenous peoples in the care for the earth paralleled with that of the Church. It is difficult to develop a universal or general description of indigenous peoples; indeed, "diversity" may be the term that best describes them (Javier 2014).

In developing the topic, the discussion will focus on the following questions: What are the indigenous people's wisdom traditions of caring for the earth that point towards integral ecology? Why should the Church look at indigenous peoples' wisdom in its mission of human and ecological flourishing? How can the Church perform its mission of caring for the earth while learning from indigenous people's wisdom and thereby respond to the challenges of today's ecological and environmental destruction?

The Wisdom of the Indigenous Peoples

The term "indigenous" refers to the ethnic groups with obvious cultural, linguistic, and kinship bonds who are often so marginalized by modern nation states that their inherent dignity and coherence as societies are in danger of being lost (Grim 2001). Indigenous peoples are

connected through their close relationships in their clan, and they are people whose underlying organizational principle is a social relationship among family, clan, band, tribe, or other structures, rather than the religion or sacred belief system to which they subscribe (Palmer and Burgess 2012).

The wisdom that the indigenous peoples have is rich and abundantly immeasurable. Such is a knowledge that is gained (some may say earned) through time, place, and experience (Jones 2009). From the beginning of their existence, indigenous peoples have embraced a sustainable ecological approach towards nature and its resources from which modern human societies can and should learn. Their land as their home is an extension of themselves. Their land and their life, thus, are understood to be deeply intertwined. Life begins and ends in the same land. The land and all living beings are sacred, providing material sustenance and fulfillment regarding their spiritual longing. The earth is understood as sacred and holy, for the revered spirits are one with nature. Indeed, the indigenous peoples developed a unique belief and knowledge of managing and caring responsibly for their natural resources. They see and find life in nature, which they cherish, protect, and preserve.

Indigenous peoples value the environment more highly than they do their own short-term benefits. The *kaingin* or the swidden system (slash-and-burn “shifting cultivation”) is regarded as an exploitation of the forest by some indigenous peoples. For example, the Indigenous Mangyans of Mindoro, Philippines, respect particular places that are free from *kaingin* because of their sacredness. According to one Mangyan in an interview: “What we *kaingin* [verb] are not major forests, because we consider those sacred, we respect that. We *kaingin* between our plants, *hagonoyan* (type of weed), not big trees” (Rodriguez 2015). Indigenous peoples also consider the common good, which means that rampant use of their land is avoided by practicing traditional shifting cultivation of the land with alternative fallow periods (resting of land), a system that is considered to be more sustainable.

Indigenous peoples take from nature only what is needed. For example, the Mangyan share the same view with those of the Arrernte people of Australia and the Samoan people. The elderly teach the young to consume what is only needed and moderate in consuming natural resources (Nguyen 2016). The indigenous peoples consider their land as their home. They are one with their land, and their land owns them. God created land for 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 according to the tribal leaders (Simeon 2017). At the same time, land must be cultivated so as to give and sustain life.

Besides taking what should be consumed only within the day and thinking of others who should benefit from nature, indigenous peoples also have to ask permission, talk to nature, and perform rituals when they are to cut a tree or take an animal’s life. Nature is an extension of their own life to be respected. As Gaston Kibiten attests:

Farmers casually addressed their rice fields and gardens, gently coaching the plants to grow robust and productive. They talked to their rice fields, expressing their wish that these do not get barren or give way to erosion; to the water to be sufficient and make the plants grow; and to the water spring so that this will not dry up. When cutting down trees, people addressed the tree and gently asked permission to cut this, as they explained their

need for doing so. Upon cutting down the tree, they covered the stump with leaves and soil, just like a poultice is applied to a wounded person (Kibiten 2018).

What then can the Church learn from the indigenous peoples in their daily living of caring for the earth? According to Andylyn Simeon, the indigenous peoples' 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 (Simeon 2017). Thus, the ecological concern springs from values inherent in the indigenous peoples. The indigenous peoples' traditional worldview and religion, including ecological ethos, can be an important resource in today's struggle towards caring for the earth (Kibiten 2018).

The Church's Mission in View of Integral Ecology

All of humanity is now on the brink of losing our only home and threatening the precious gift of life. No one is exempted or excused from this situation; even culprits are now becoming victims. Pope Paul VI has already stated that this dire situation is due to man's ill-considered exploitation of nature, such that he now risks destroying it and becoming in turn the victim of this degradation (Paul VI 1971). The evangelical Cape Town Commitment also acknowledges that humanity must "repent of our part in the destruction, waste and pollution of the earth's resources and our collusion in the toxic idolatry of consumerism" (Lausanne Movement 2011). The horrific destruction of the earth, thus, is a result of humanities' rampant and relentless manipulation and wasteful exploitation of the earth's natural resources.

The care for the earth concerns all people regardless of who they are and where they come from. Together with the various sectors of society, the world's religious leaders have to do something to prevent the earth's obliteration. As Pope Francis points out, the destruction of the human environment is extremely serious, not only because God has entrusted the world to us men and women, but because human life is itself a gift that must be defended from various forms of debasement (Francis 2015). Earth, our common home and our only home, is now crying for help to be emancipated from the hands of her exploiters.

The voice of the earth has long been neglected. Care for the earth is a duty that all of humanity needs to fulfill. Calling for the urgency of the situation, Pope Francis explains that today the scientific community realizes what the poor have long told us: harm, perhaps irreversible harm, is being done to the ecosystem. The earth, entire peoples, and individual persons are being brutally punished (Vigini 2016). The poor, marginalized, and primary victims in this world-wide tragedy include the indigenous peoples. The world is now facing different catastrophes that endanger all peoples from all walks of life. Humanity is now, just like before, being called to listen and act on the mission to care for the earth which is our common home.

The answer to the problem of the earth's crisis is to consider and live up to the true meaning of sustainable development. Thus, according to *Laudato Si'*, a technological and economic development which does not leave in its wake a better world and an integrally higher quality of life cannot be considered progress (Francis 2015). Development and progress should be geared towards human flourishing, achieving a good quality of life. The goal of integral progress is not merely technological innovation or the increase in economic growth rates, as in the traditional understanding of progress (Marx 2016). The goal of quality of life, which has never before taken up such a central position in any other social encyclical, refers to human beings as made in God's

image and to their particular dignity. The shift in the notion of progress is, however, not achieved only *for* people, but also *through* people (Marx 2016). People of the earth must then participate toward solidarity and communion for a just and sharing of life for the whole creation (Boff 1995).

On the other hand, sustainability, according to Daniel Scheid, is the ordered interconnection among species. God wills the diversity of race, cultures, and creatures. A diversity of creatures best manifests God's goodness, while the harmonious order among these various parts best glorifies God. Human beings, however, have the highest position and responsibility among all the created beings. As such, we are the only creatures on Earth gifted with such a degree of intelligence and free will, hence humans have a privileged role in promoting the cosmic good through our wise governing of other creatures. *Dominion* does not mean to dominate but to have a thoughtful and judicious participation in God's governing of the entire universe. Moreover, humans ought to preserve the goodness of Earth that enables such a rich diversity of creatures and ecosystems (Scheid 2016).

Clearly the care for the earth must be a matter of grave concern to all of humanity. "The Bible declares God's redemptive purpose for *creation* itself. Integral mission means discerning, proclaiming, and living out, the biblical truth that the gospel is God's good news, through the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, for individual persons, *and* for society, *and* for creation" (Lausanne Movement 2011). Sustainable development has to consider the quality of life of all persons and families. This development moves toward integral ecology that focuses on the principle of common good. The integral ecology approach developed in *Laudato Si'* corresponds with the principle of the common good that the Pope regards as the central principle in social ethics (Marx 2016, 304-305).

In the project of Pope Francis' call towards an integral ecology, what is needed is a missionary renewal wherein strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature (Francis 2015). Missionaries and missiologists who share in God's mission have the mission to promote care for the earth and integral ecology. Pope Francis urges every person to have a deep and serious ecological conversion. The care for the earth as a common home is a duty to be upheld by each and every person. Integral ecology includes all of humanity, all of God's creatures, and all that is within the natural environment's bounds. It is noteworthy, however, that indigenous peoples are given a special place: according to Pope Francis the land for the indigenous peoples is not a commodity but rather a gift from God and from their ancestors who rest there, a sacred space with which they need to interact if they are to maintain their identity and values (Francis 2015).

The Mission of Dialogue Towards an Integral Ecology

Today we are called to listen and engage in dialogue in a global, plural, and diverse world. The earth does not only speak for itself but can even bring different sectors, such as religions and cultures, into dialogue to denounce injustices afflicted on nature and humanity. This dialogue is a movement away from capitalists' project of an economy that kills (Francis 2013). A project that favors those on the margins and denounces both the self-interest of a few and the whole contemporary globalization project is marked by a call for dialogue (Castillo 2016). Felix Wilfred points out, "Today it is the earth that holds the prospect of bringing the religious together and so leading them to a meaningful dialogue on God and humanity" (Wilfred 2009).

The earth brings people and God into dialogue, while the peoples making up humanity are closely interrelated due to living in a common home. Human beings are part of nature, included in it, and thus in constant interaction with it (Francis 2015).

Caring for the earth needs a concerted effort from all peoples in the spheres of politics, religion, economy, culture, and science, to name a few mentioned in chapter four of *Laudato Si'*. Dialogue is the key to the collaboration of the Church in all of these areas. This dialogue should connect us with the expertise of indigenous peoples' ways of caring for the earth. The earth is for them a common home of all living beings great and small. According to Edgar Javier, "Indigenous peoples survived because of human-earth interaction" (Javier 2014). They have survived for many generations because of their knowledge and experience of the natural world. They know the meaning of the saying that the "whole is greater than its part."

Engaging into dialogue *with* and not only *to* the indigenous peoples would lead the Church to the true meaning and sense of being dialogue partners. In the field of interreligious dialogue, people of other faiths are seen as equals yet as having their own uniqueness. However, the indigenous peoples have been looked down upon for many generations, even until today. Javier argues that "The colonial and neo-colonial articulations of indigeneity such as pagan, primitive and uncivilized must be removed from the lexicon" (Javier 2014). The indigenous peoples are to be recognized as who they are, and within the global community the indigenous peoples must define themselves (Javier 2014). Such acknowledgements would be initial steps in genuine collaboration and in engaging in honest dialogue. To ask for forgiveness, and being forgiven, is a way towards the process of authentic dialogue.

The indigenous peoples' solidarity with the earth and all creatures springs from their view that the world is a common home for all. Creatures on earth are brothers and sisters, like what St. Francis of Assisi believed, taught, and lived. In the same way, indigenous peoples acknowledge kinship with all creatures of the earth, sky, and water (Javier 2014). Integral ecology follows the way of looking at others as another self, as one with one's self. The beauty of diversity should move people to acknowledge and respect others, from which acceptance and learning would come. Pope Francis explains in *Laudato Si'*: "If we approach nature and the environment without this openness to awe and wonder, if we no longer speak the language of fraternity and beauty in our relationship with the world, our attitude will be that of masters, consumers, ruthless exploiters, unable to set limits on their immediate needs" (Francis 2015). There must be an attraction to what is beautiful, what could be called a missiological attraction to the beauty of nature and ecology. Such an attraction may be equivalent to the "way of beauty" or the *via pulchritudinis* in the *Evangelii Gaudium* of Pope Francis.

The earth as a common home is for all to live in. A common home integrates and gives access to its richness for all, for the common good. God so designed the universe in order and in beauty. The order of the universe is its greatest attribute. Humans must foster nature's ability to create new life and harmonious interconnections, rather than merely what it is able to yield for human consumption (Scheid 2016). Related is how finding interconnectivity in a plural and diverse world is our mission today. The world and all that is in it is meant for all. This is what in particular the rest of the world should learn from indigenous peoples. The Mangyan peoples who do *kaingin*, performing shifting cultivation and fallow periods to allow rest to the land, can instruct others to think of others who in the future will also cultivate it. The Dumagats of Bulacan and Aetas of Zambales in the Philippines consider the forest as their home, and even

domestic animals are revered as members of the family. The Samoan people catch fish that is enough only for the family members, including their guests; if they catch more than what they need, they return the surplus fish to the sea. The Arrernte people do the same; they will only pick needed fruits from a tree so that others may benefit from their share of the tree's fruits. The Arrernte also distribute and divide among their relatives meat of a kangaroo. The indigenous people know how to dialogue with nature. Michael Nguyen states that a kangaroo hunted by Arrernte people in the bush will be cut through a sacred ritual as a thanksgiving prayer to Mother Earth and to the precious life of the kangaroo (Nguyen 2016).

In the same manner, the Church should engage in dialogue with those who highly esteem Mother Earth. Mother Earth cares for us, like a mother cares for her children. Thus, care must also be given to the earth, our common home. This care and love have been expressed and practiced by the indigenous peoples since their origins. Their cultures should be protected, for the disappearance of a culture can be just as serious, or even more serious, than the disappearance of a species of plant or animal (Francis 2015). The indigenous peoples' ancestral lands must be safeguarded, because when they remain on their land they themselves care for it best (Francis 2015).

Conclusion

As original inhabitants of the world's myriad settings, the indigenous peoples have gained wisdom from love and care for the earth. They embody the most authentic meaning of caring for a common home. Their life is a life that speaks for itself (a faithful witnessing of life), because they see the world as one with them. The world is sacred because it is also where their ancestors and other spiritual beings co-exist with them. The Church's call to love and care for the earth is a call to love God, human beings, and nonhuman creatures. Thus, to live in a common home is to live according to the principles of solidarity and common good.

These principles are present in the lives of the indigenous peoples. As such, indigenous peoples have many things to teach the so-called developed world. May we who consider ourselves more advanced be evangelized by their way of life. Learning from them, may we have a real sense of solidarity which is at the same time aware that we live in a common home which God has entrusted to us (Francis 2015). Doing this, we take the path of dialogue.

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