

African Wisdom in Dialogue with *Laudato si'*: An Environmental Ethics Based on the Paradigm of Recognition and Sacred Care

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Pope Francis appeals to all humanity, requesting dialogue and reconciliation among all people, and between people and created nature. This appeal recognizes the role that everyone should play to recover our state as human beings created in the image of God together with other creatures. The recognition of our unique beauty as created by God reminds us of the beauty of all other creatures of God's creation and hence engages us to respect and protect all creatures. This paper brings the same concern for the recognition and respect of the environment. It is a call for dialogue and reconciliation among human beings and with created nature from the African perspective in dialogue with the Church's perspective as developed by *Laudato si'*.¹

The environmental crisis raises a fundamental question of human identity as it portrays the conflictual context that prevails. The way we treat nature reveals something of our identity. This is very true from the perspective of African culture, where the whole identity is linked to the quality of one's relationships in a complex network of life. An African, traditionally speaking, qualifies for full human identity only insofar as he or she lives in harmonious relationships with fellow human beings, the ancestors, created nature, and God. Nature is as critical in this mixture of networks as the place of fellow humans.

The broken environment we live in shows our broken humanity. The distorted relationships with nature that we are witnessing call us to revisit our identity, since our identity is determined by the quality of our relationships. The recognition of such disorder urges human beings to

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¹ Francis, *Laudato si'* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015); hereafter cited in text as *LS*; references are to section numbers.

initiate a sincere dialogue with themselves and the created world to reach a full reconciliation. This is a condition for recovering our full identity. Here, the African identity stands as an appropriate partner to *LS*, since the African identity helps to recover relationality as an important dimension of human identity. The dialogue between *LS* and African identity is a major contribution of this work, as it leads to the proposition of an environmental ethics that will no longer be based on the paradigm of dominion or stewardship. I propose an environmental ethics that is based on recognition and sacred care,² one in which human beings are called to rediscover the right relationships that were intended by God, in whose image and likeness we are created.

This paper will have three major observations: the presentation of African identity³ in relation to the environment; the presentation of the Church's contribution with an emphasis on *LS*; and the dialogue between these two.

African Personhood Reconstructed

The first generation of African theologians mostly attempted to reconstruct African identity. This work of reconstructing one's identity is critical, as the Cameroonian Jesuit, theologian, and historian Engelbert Mveng observes: "If the creative genius of black people dies, it will be the end of our people. Our survival requires the restoration of our cultural sovereignty."⁴ This section will deal with the new way some African scholars suggest looking at Africa and Africans. It is an attempt to correct biases that some Western missionaries and colonizers had about African people to the extent of misrepresenting them. However, one will notice that in the attempt to reconstruct African identity, scholars have exaggerated and misrepresented the people and their culture.

In his book *African Religions and Philosophy*, John Samuel Mbiti, a Kenyan theologian, introduces a new dimension for understanding African people. The complexity of their religious experiences is important

² I developed this theory in my contribution of a forthcoming book chapter. "African Identity in the Context of the Current Environmental Crisis," in *Accounting for the Faith That Is in Us: Essays in Contemporary African Theology*, ed. Patrick Mwanja, CSSp, and Laurenti Magesa.

³ In this paper, *identity* will be used interchangeably with *personhood* and will carry the same meaning.

⁴ Engelbert Mveng, "Black African Art as Cosmic Liturgy and Religious Language," in *African Theology En Route*, ed. Kofi Appiah-Kubi and Sergio Torres (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979), 141.

for understanding who they are. For Mbiti, the encounter with several religious traditions in Africa in recent centuries has had a profound impact on life and identity. “It is religion, more than anything else, which colors their understanding of the universe and their empirical participation in that universe, making life a profoundly religious phenomenon.”⁵

People in some African countries or communities celebrate life and events from a religious perspective that should capture our attention in defining African identity in this era. In acknowledging the complexities of the African identity, we should be able to read old practices with new eyes and draw meaning out of them. Such challenges are also raised by the Cameroonian priest, sociologist, anthropologist, and theologian Jean-Marc Ela. He observes that “the meaning of the festival, deeply rooted in the people’s mentality and their socio-religious practices, forces us to reinterpret it as a response of faith to the message of the Beatitudes.”⁶

Ela shares his strong awareness with the whole community, in relation to the responsibility Africans should take to correct the injustices done to their identity. Here Ela addresses the issue of a serious evangelization of African culture, saying, “Today we need to reactualize the Christian mystery within a cultural structure, where ‘symbolism expresses the destiny of humanity everywhere as a struggle between life and death.’ Both the gospel and Africa require that of us.”⁷

African identity is to be understood in a holistic way, in all aspects. Congolese theologian Bénézet Bujo observes, “Africans are traditionally characterized by a holistic type of thinking and feeling. For them, there is no dichotomy between the sacred and the secular; they regard themselves in close relationship with the entire cosmos.”⁸

The reconstruction of African identity should not be limited to duplicating African culture as it was ages before Christ. On the other hand, we should not speak of African culture by reducing Africa to the culture of today, as if Africa started with the modern age. We need to use the past,

⁵ John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Heinemann, 1999), 256.

⁶ Jean-Marc Ela, *My Faith as an African* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009), 6.

⁷ Ela, 43.

⁸ Bénézet Bujo, “Ecology and Ethical Responsibility from an African Perspective,” in *African Ethics: An Anthology of Comparative and Applied Ethics*, ed. Munyaradzi Felix Murove (Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2009), 281.

as well as consider the experiences of people living in Africa today, to build a bright future for all. The exhortation of the Tanzanian priest and theologian Laurenti Magesa carries weight. “If we are to understand the deep meaning of spiritual identity and to come to terms with its implications for Christians in Africa, we might want to keep in mind the wisdom of maintaining the continuity between old and new realities in human life rather than succumbing to the temptation of creating a radical break between them.”⁹

In fact, the content of togetherness is so important in understanding the African personhood that South African Anglican Bishop Desmond Tutu says, “We are human because we belong. We are made for community, for togetherness, for family, to exist in a delicate network of interdependence.”¹⁰ This belonging has a tremendous implication for the way we conduct our lives.

The pride of the African people should be visible in their actions and the way they apply the values they hold—from those of their ancestors to ones from their own lives. Environmental protection is one of the critical areas where these values are needed more urgently than ever. The environment becomes the place where African people should express their belonging together to the earth.

African identity is only complete when all the dimensions of an African person are safe. Bujo correctly observes that “experts now accept that Africans can only be understood in reference to their basic attitude towards life. Likewise, only from this standpoint can their relationship to the cosmos be explained.”¹¹

The connection between an African person and nature is deeply grounded; it responds to an existential necessity. There is an obligation embodied in the African faith. Nature is sacred. It is a place where their ancestors and other divine spirits dwell. Far from being a commodity to be used, nature is a mystery in the eyes of an African. For this reason, in many African cultures, people go into bushes for the initiation of the young ones; there, the secrets of life are revealed to them. From nature, elders and wise people collect leaves and roots to cure their sicknesses. In nature, they perform rituals. It is under the trees that palavers bring

⁹ Laurenti Magesa, *What Is Not Sacred? African Spirituality* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013), 106.

¹⁰ Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (New York: Random House, 1999), 196.

¹¹ Bujo, “Ecology and Ethical Responsibility,” 281.

about reconciliation. Nature becomes a privileged witness to reconciliation within the human community. Aware of these, Magesa asked the question which would become the title of his book *What Is Not Sacred?* According to Magesa, everything that exists carries a spiritual meaning and weight.

In the context of African culture, every person aspires to become an ancestor one day. “The human community in Africa consists of the living, the unborn and the ancestors (the deceased).”¹² However, to become an ancestor, one must live an upright life, as measured by the way one respects the network of relationships one has. Morality is tested according to the way one relates to created nature with a sense of responsibility, recognition, care, and concern for the good of future generations. It is the way one cares about nature that qualifies one to be counted among the ancestors worthy of remembrance. Because nature is the place of an expression of human morality, one cannot mismanage created nature and still be respected by the society in Africa. We cannot overlook the point that Francis makes in *LS* on the importance of the land for the indigenous people. The “land 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” (*LS* 146).

At last, one should care for nature out of fear of the ancestors who are alive and active in human life and created nature. As Bujo puts it, “African ethics is based essentially on the community model that includes the living and the dead.”¹³ The communitarian aspect proves to be very helpful since it provides some influence on those who are morally weak and incapable of giving up some of their privileges to preserve the entirety of nature.

African culture and its religion have much to share with all of humanity. Because created nature is not something external to an African person, the care for the environment ought not to be based on utilitarianism. Nature should be appreciated for itself and recognized as indispensable for all life. Wangari Maathai observes that “for many native peoples, such as the Aka of the Congo and other forest dwellers, the forests have not been fearful places that they must conquer or where they cannot go, but their entire world, the source for their food and medicine, clothing, shelter. To the Aka, the forest and indeed what the

¹² Chukwunyere Kamalu, *Person, Divinity & Nature: A Modern View of the Person and the Cosmos in African Thought* (London: Karnak House, 1998), 31.

¹³ Bénézet Bujo, “Is There a Specific African Ethic?” in Murove, *African Ethics*, 117.

world calls the ‘environment’ does not exist beyond or outside the human realm.”¹⁴

African people are not linked to the environment by something of the past. Rather their connection to the environment is the condition necessary for recovering their African identity, surviving, and flourishing. Analyzing in her time the eight United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) projected to be achieved in 2015—to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger; achieve universal primary education; promote gender equality and empower women; reduce child mortality; improve maternal health; combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases; ensure environmental sustainability; and develop a global partnership for development—Maathai calls for a new ordering of priorities. The environment ought to be one of the first priorities (it is now the seventh). According to Maathai, the MDGs cannot be realized if the environment does not sustain all our efforts. “Achieving each of the eight MDGs depends heavily on healthy ecosystems; but this fact is often overlooked, and the seventh MDG has not received as much attention as the others. In my view, however, it is the most important, and all of the other goals should be organized around it. What happens to the ecosystem affects everything else.”¹⁵

Maathai’s writing is the fruit of her mature analysis of the MDGs. The invitation here commits everybody to actions that go far beyond the context of Africa, and echoes what Ela says: “We have not had the same past, but—unquestionably—we shall have the same future. The era of individual destinies is over. Thus, the end of the world has really arrived for each of us, for none can live any longer taking thought only for self-preservation.”¹⁶

Catholic Social Teaching on the Environment: John Paul II and Benedict XVI

The Church is committed to playing a significant role in whatever constitutes a significant part of human life and activity. According to *Gaudium et spes*, “The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these too are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers

¹⁴ Wangari Maathai, *Replenishing the Earth* (New York: Doubleday Religion, 2010), 93–94.

¹⁵ Wangari Maathai, *The Challenge for Africa* (New York: Anchor Books, 2010), 239–40.

¹⁶ Ela, *My Faith as an African*, 12.

of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts.”¹⁷ In a very prophetic way, during the Second Vatican Council, the Church made a clear turn in saying, “Through her work, whatever good is in the minds and hearts of men, whatever good lies latent in the religious practices and cultures of diverse peoples, is not only saved from destruction but is also cleansed, raised up and perfected unto the glory of God, the confusion of the devil and the happiness of man.”¹⁸ This very positive and receptive statement does not tolerate any justification for the Church to close her eyes in the presence of challenges faced by human beings, such as the environmental crisis. What did Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI do?

Pope John Paul II and the Environmental Crisis

Throughout his ministry, John Paul II showed a strong awareness of the environmental crisis and a willingness to contribute to solving this crisis. An example can be seen in his message on the occasion of the celebration of the World Day of Peace, January 1, 1990. Here John Paul II clearly states that “faced with the widespread destruction of the environment, people everywhere are coming to understand that we cannot continue to use the goods of the earth as we have in the past. ... A new ecological awareness is beginning to emerge which, rather than being downplayed, ought to be encouraged to develop into concrete programs and initiatives.”¹⁹ His May 1991 encyclical letter *Centesimus annus* also denounces human activities that do not bear a sense of responsibility. He saw that climate change is caused by the work of humans. “Instead of carrying out his role as a cooperator with God in the work of creation, man sets himself up in place of God and thus ends up provoking a rebellion on the part of nature, which is more tyrannized than governed by him.”²⁰ Humans have forgotten that our powers in created nature are “always based on God’s prior and original gift of the things that are.”²¹

¹⁷ Second Vatican Council, “Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et spes*, December 7, 1965,” in *Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary Heritage*, ed. David O’Brien and Thomas Shannon (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), sec. 1.

¹⁸ Second Vatican Council, “Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen gentium*, November 21, 1964,” Vatican website, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html, sec. 17.

¹⁹ “Message of His Holiness Pope John Paul II for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace,” Vatican website, January 1, 1990, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_19891208_xxiii-world-day-for-peace.html, sec. 1.

²⁰ John Paul II, “*Centesimus annus*,” encyclical letter, in O’Brien and Shannon, *Catholic Social Thought*, sec. 37.

²¹ John Paul II, “*Centesimus annus*.”

Benedict XVI: Caritas in veritate and the Concern for Ecology

Caritas in veritate is the first official document from the papal magisterium that contains a clear pronouncement on the issue of ecology. The context in which the encyclical was offered may have contributed to the particularity and clarity of its message on some issues, such as the necessity of caring for ecology. There was a desire to commemorate 40 years of Pope Paul VI's great encyclical *Populorum progressio*, issued in 1967. This commemoration occurred amidst an economic recession that forced the pope to wait and deepen his reflections on the issue. The recession was a serious crisis that would increase the gap between poor and rich countries. In this context, there was a need to clarify the issues and demand for more equality in dealing with the issue of integral human development, which was so dear to Paul VI. Benedict XVI notes, "Integral human development is primarily a vocation, and therefore it involves a free assumption of responsibility in solidarity on the part of everyone."²²

In *CV*, Benedict XVI returns us to the fundamental truth about ourselves and about our vocation. He specifies, "A vocation is a call that requires a free and responsible answer. Integral human development presupposes the responsible freedom of the individual and of peoples: no structure can guarantee this development over and above human responsibility" (*CV* 17). Responsibility is a very important dimension in human life, and it is only when we are able to live in a responsible manner that we can assume stewardship of the world.

Benedict XVI therefore calls upon each and every person of good will to seriously take up our duty of stewardship and to live it in our relation to the created world. He invites us to live as stewards of the world, to wisely use the goods we find in our natural environments. This is what the Roman pontiff clearly says: "Today the subject of development is also closely related to the duties arising from *our relationship to the natural environment*. The environment is God's gift to everyone, and in our use of it we have a responsibility towards the poor, towards future generations and towards humanity as a whole" (*CV* 48).

Benedict XVI continues by using exegesis to convey the message about why humans must show responsibility in dealing with nature. He writes, "*Nature expresses a design of love and truth*. It is prior to us, and it has

²² Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2009), sec. 11; hereafter cited in text as *CV*; references are to section numbers.

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)” (CV 48). This recognition has moral consequences. We must behave in a way that recognizes nature as a mirror of the Creator and permit it to speak God’s message to all peoples, including the coming generations.

It is in that view that the pope continues: “Human beings legitimately exercise a *responsible stewardship over nature*, in order to protect it, to enjoy its fruits and to cultivate it in new ways, with the assistance of advanced technologies, so that it can worthily accommodate and feed the world’s population” (CV 50). The idea of stewardship is of utmost importance in the promotion of ecology, for it presents human beings not just as cohabitants of earth with nature, but also as responsible for the protection and development of all created nature.

To accomplish his role and mission as the universal pastor, Benedict XVI draws some lessons from what he observes in human relationships with created nature. He notes, “The way humanity treats the environment influences the way it treats itself, and vice versa. This invites contemporary society to a serious review of its life-style which, in many parts of the world, is prone to hedonism and consumerism, regardless of their harmful consequences” (CV 51). Benedict XVI shares African wisdom and culture, expressed in the view of the truly sacred link that binds together all that God has created, and the call to develop a more harmonious relationship with creation.

Pope Francis and *Laudato si'*: A Paradigm Shift

In *LS*, Francis offers the most explicit pronouncement on the environmental crisis ever made by a Roman pontiff. This encyclical differs from the classical teachings of the Church, and by that virtue, it is a kind of *Rerum novarum* of the twenty-first century. *LS* is not a doctrinal pronouncement; rather, it is a document that invites Christ’s Church to remain open to new calls from God in the situations of the world. In this encyclical, Francis expresses his conviction that “the urgent challenge to protect our common home includes a concern to bring the whole human family together to seek a sustainable and integral development, for we know that things can change” (*LS* 13). The informational quality of this document makes it acceptable for people of good will beyond the boundaries of the Church and engages them into action.

In *LS*, Pope Francis speaks of an “integral ecology” that envisions the environmental problem in a more holistic and integral manner. He

acknowledges the fundamental links between the environment, human beings, and God. Francis relocates the environmental debate to the crossroad of every other discipline and dimension of human life. He prudently uses the information from many sciences concerned about environmental degradation, from physics and geology to environmental science.

Among the many key insights, *LS* appeals for a universal dialogue between all peoples. Francis has the courage to move from a Church that has always considered itself as the center to a learning, or “listening,” Church. He appeals without fear “for a new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet. We need a conversation which includes everyone, since the environmental challenge we are undergoing, and its human roots, concern and affect us all” (*LS* 14). He makes extensive references to other traditions’ valuable contributions in the fight against environmental degradation. Francis’s urgency comes from his conviction that this situation will not be resolved single-handedly. For the pope, “attempts to resolve all problems through uniform regulations or technical interventions can lead to overlooking the complexities of local problems which demand the active participation of all members of the community” (*LS* 144).

Another key aspect of this encyclical is the call for a change of attitude from dominion to stewardship or care for the environment. This is a huge shift in the well-established anthropocentrism of the Church’s teaching since its encounter with Greek philosophy. Francis argues that created nature—every single created element—has meaning in and of itself. Such an understanding brings an aspect of recognition that opposes the culture of dominion that human beings have over nature. Francis suggests, “Our insistence that each human being is an image of God should not make us overlook the fact that each creature has its own purpose. None is superfluous. The entire material universe speaks of God’s love, his boundless affection for us” (*LS* 84).

Created nature should not be treated in a utilitarian manner. Francis clearly warns that “since the world has been given to us, we can no longer view reality in a purely utilitarian way, in which efficiency and productivity are entirely geared to our individual benefit. Intergenerational solidarity is not optional, but rather a basic question of justice, since the world we have received also belongs to those who will follow us” (*LS* 159). To emphasize his ideas, the Holy Father refers to the wisdom of the bishops of Portugal, for whom “the environment is part of a logic of receptivity. It is on loan to each generation, which must then hand it on to the next” (*LS* 159).

The approach developed by Francis is a holistic approach to created nature wherein Francis places everything in the context of a unique and shared universe created by God. *LS* urges us to depart from our anthropocentric approach to embrace an approach that recognizes the importance of each creature. The Bishop of Rome wants to develop an integral ecology that extends its horizon beyond traditional limits. According to him, “An integral ecology is marked by this broader vision” (*LS* 159).

Francis courageously abandons the scapegoat culture historically used by the majority of world leaders, who often place blame and responsibility on the poor, the weak, and those without a voice. The Roman pontiff denounces the culture of consumerism that is promoted by superpowers who have a monopoly on the world economy. Prophetically, the pope remarks that “since the market tends to promote extreme consumerism in an effort to sell its products, people can easily get caught up in a whirlwind of needless buying and spending. Compulsive consumerism is one example of how the techno-economic paradigm affects individuals” (*LS* 203). Ultimately, for Francis, the ecological crisis is both a moral and a spiritual issue that should be dealt with through an attitude shift from the anthropocentric attitude toward created nature to one of awe and wonder. Through *LS*, he challenges the world’s decision makers to face their own responsibilities.

Though the purpose of this short review of the encyclical is not to discuss all of its aspects (just as the purpose of the encyclical is not to resolve all problems), we should mention a few limits. First is the fact that the pope does not mention the exclusion of women in social life as having an impact on the environmental imbalance. The way the Church and the society at large have treated women is similar to the way they have treated the environment. Male domination has a great deal to do with the attitude human beings have toward the environment. Rita D. Sherma states that the pope “refrains from speaking of the injustice of androcentrism that is the cause of the near absence of one half of the human species from leadership in religion, politics, and economics.”²³ These limitations should not overshadow the whole encyclical of Francis. As Sherma says, “*Laudato si’* is a commendable effort: it covers a lot of conceptual territory, it offers many valuable insights, and will, hopefully,

²³ Rita D. Sherma, “A Hindu Response,” in *For Our Common Home: Process-Relational Responses to “Laudato si’*,” ed. John B. Cobb, Ignacio Castuera, and Bill McKibben (Anoka, MN: Process Century, 2015), 360.

bring faith back to the table in the search for ways and means of saving what remains of our natural world.”²⁴

African Wisdom and *Laudato si'*: Response to a Call to Dialogue

As noted earlier, Francis acknowledges the necessity of dialogue among cultures and different fields of science to overcome the environmental crisis that has become a tremendous concern of our time (*LS* 14). In response to this invitation, the African understanding of personhood stands as a valid and suitable partner for *LS* to contribute to the resolution of this crisis. A quick observation of various African communities, such as the San of South Africa, teaches us that elements of creation are recognized as holding divine attributes and, therefore, should be respected. For the San people, “some physical features of the environment are believed to be invested with supernatural power and are accorded due respect and awe.”²⁵ This echoes the attitude of Francis, who invites us to look at the natural environment as capable of meaning something beyond what we can perceive or even suspect. He says, “Some less numerous species, although generally unseen, nonetheless play a critical role in maintaining the equilibrium of a particular place” (*LS* 34).

One could see in both viewpoints a consistent proposition regarding the kind of relationships human beings should have with created nature, inscribed in the reality of what Martin Buber describes in his book *I and Thou*. For Buber, “the aim of relation is relation’s own being, that is, contact with the Thou. Through contact with every Thou, we are stirred with a breath of the Thou, that is, of eternal life.”²⁶ Here we have an invitation to regain touch with created nature so that we can appreciate and listen to the environment—hear its songs of praise to God, as well as the cries of suffering at the abominable treatment by humans. In the same way, we cannot understand relationships outside of our will to see others as ourselves. Here, there is a need for reciprocity and mutual appreciation.

In keeping with this understanding, Francis eloquently reminds us that “a correct relationship with the created world demands that we not weaken this social dimension of openness to others, much less the transcendent dimension of our openness to the ‘Thou’ of God. Our

²⁴ Sherma, 360.

²⁵ S. A. Thorpe, *African Traditional Religions: An Introduction* (Pretoria: University of South Africa, 1991), 28.

²⁶ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1937), 63.

relationship with the environment can never be isolated from our relationship with others and with God. Otherwise, it would be nothing more than romantic individualism dressed up in ecological garb, locking us into a stifling immanence” (*LS* 119).

After a careful reading of the two sources, African personhood and *LS*, a new paradigm develops concerning the way a true and genuine relationship between humans and the rest of created nature should be enhanced from the human perspective. Inspired by these two perspectives, I suggest that human beings should move to a relationship with nature that is marked by recognition and sacred care. This is the attitude that comes from recognizing all created nature as Thou. Then, in accord with Buber’s perception of Thou, human beings will recognize created nature as the Thou that both “makes its appearance as individuality,” as well as the Thou that “makes its appearance as person and becomes conscious of itself as subjectivity.”²⁷ This is important because, in Buber’s words, “the one is the spiritual form of natural detachment, the other the spiritual form of natural solidarity of connection.”²⁸

In both *LS* and African culture/religion, or ethics, the goal is the transmission of life. To be successful, an ethic of environment must promote life in all dimensions in every creature, including human beings. In keeping with this, Magesa affirms that

the foundation and purpose of the ethical perspective of African Religion is life, life in its fullness. Everything is perceived with reference to this. It is no wonder, then, Africans quickly draw ethical conclusions about thoughts, words, and actions of human beings, or even of “natural” cosmological events, by asking questions such as: does the particular happening promote life? If so, it is good, just, ethical, desirable, divine. Or, does it diminish life in any way? Then it is wrong, bad, unethical, unjust, detestable.²⁹

Similarly, in *LS*, Francis poses the question of life in relation to other beings that are still unknown to us. For him, our actions should respond to the question of whether they promote life in created beings as a whole. In this sense, the Holy Father invites us to a deep reflection on our relationship with the environment in these terms:

It may well disturb us to learn of the extinction of mammals or birds, since they are more visible. But the good functioning of ecosystems also requires fungi, algae,

²⁷ Buber, 62.

²⁸ Buber, 62.

²⁹ Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 77.

worms, insects, reptiles and an innumerable variety of microorganisms. Some less numerous species, although generally unseen, nonetheless play a critical role in maintaining the equilibrium of a particular place. Human beings must intervene when a geosystem reaches a critical state. But nowadays, such intervention in nature has become more and more frequent. As a consequence, serious problems arise, leading to further interventions; human activity becomes ubiquitous, with all the risks which this entails. (*LS* 34)

The concept of life from the African perspective is not confined to human beings. Abundant life is the goal of African spirituality for everything that exists, including those parts of the natural environment that are not yet known to us. By embracing African understandings and incorporating them into her teachings on the environment, the Roman Catholic Church will be able to develop, with expanded language, a new paradigm of relationships between human beings and the created world, based on recognition and sacred care. This is the only condition under which we will recover our state of being human, as created in the image of God.

Conclusion

This paper intends to contribute to the development of a sound approach to the current environmental crisis. This investigation presents a few selected aspects of African wisdom and the Church's teaching, with a particular interest in *LS*, the first encyclical dedicated to the issue of ecology. My intention is to first acknowledge the fact that something has gone wrong and then locate the origin of the environmental degradation from the perspective of the Roman Catholic Church to suggest a possible way to dialogue with African wisdom. This acknowledgement is aimed at creating a new dynamic, a clear identification of actions needed to remedy what can be remedied. In this sense, drawing from his namesake, St. Francis, the pope presents the environmental challenges in the context of our own time to find the solutions.

In this paper, I also briefly discuss developments in the teachings of recent popes on ecological concerns: John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and now Francis. This brief survey shows a clear move away from attitudes of dominion, in which humans have given themselves the right to use or abuse the natural environment, towards an attitude of recognition and sacred care, which can be drawn from the synthesis between Francis's *LS* and the understanding of personhood in the African cultural worldview. Francis shifts the paradigm in many ways and leads the Roman Catholic Church from the position of a knowing Church to that of a more receptive, listening Church.

Investigating this topic has been most interesting, as it brings to the surface the awareness that we are still in the midst of this work. I have learned that we, as human beings and as Christians, have been a big part of the problem of our troubled environment. In the same way, we are invited to become a part of the solution to correct and overcome this disaster. The environmental crisis that was created by humans will not be resolved without great human effort and action. We must accept this reality, show our readiness to let go of our comfortable lifestyles, and protect within the natural environment what can still be protected. This is our sacred duty to God for his gift to us of life on earth.