

INTEGRITY OF CREATION – ECO JUSTICE, FRANCISCAN CHALLENGE

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

The earth was without form and void and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters. And God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good....

And God said, ‘Let the earth put forth vegetation, plants yielding seed, and fruit trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, each according to its kind upon the earth. And it was so.

The earth brought forth vegetation, plants yielding seed according to their own kind, and trees bearing fruits in which is their seed, each according to its own kind. And God saw that it was good. ...” (Gen. 1).

Genesis 1 depicts God’s act of creation in stages, beginning with the creation of light and ending with the creation of the human. What is significant is that at the end of each stage, God found God’s creation was good. Thus the Genesis narrative puts it succinctly that God’s original plan for creation had been realised in this original paradise, where all God’s creatures existed in harmony and communion.

Accordingly, it can be concluded that originally, in every eco-system, all creatures including humans formed a community interacting with each other in inter-dependence. It is this exquisite combination of life-form and their interaction with one another and with the whole of the natural world that had made this earth a uniquely habitable place for all creatures as well as for human beings.

Earth is in Peril: Global Environmental Concern.

The environmental crisis symptomised by irregular weather patterns, climate change, global warming, depletion of the ozone layer, pollution of water, erosion of the top soil, declining ground water supplies, desertification, rising sea levels, degradation of the biosphere, unsanitary living conditions continue to grip the world. Much concern is being expressed over the devastating effects of all these on the diversity and variety of life on earth and the natural patterns it forms: different eco-systems such as forests, lakes, rivers, wet-lands, deserts, arable lands etc. As humans continue to exploit the earth’s limited resources at a blistering pace, the very face of the earth is being changed and its fate hanging in the balance. In fact it is generally accepted that climate change would lead to change in the distribution, increased extinction rate, changes in relationships between species, changes in reproductive timing and changes in length of growing seasons of plant life. The effects of such change are already being experienced in various parts of the world, especially in developing countries.

Why this Devastation

The major cause for this devastation could be traced to the human’s dominating poise vis a vis the rest of creation, making the human the centre of the universe. This anthropocentrism and this drive to possess and dominate have led us to ruthlessly exploit nature on a so-called development drive for the benefit of a few elites at the expense of nature and the majority of humans. The luxurious life-styles of the rich, ever increasing number of vehicles, technological ventures, military industrial complexes feeding numerous low intensity conflicts in the world, all contribute to the emission of green-house gases leading to the depletion of the ozone layer.

Undoubtedly technology has contributed much to make life more secure and comfortable. Technology in itself is neutral but it is the use that humans make of technology that threatens all life; the chemical dumps and nuclear wastes speak for themselves. Pushed by his inquisitiveness and acquisitiveness to subjugate the earth, the human not only destroys the beauty of nature but also the capacity of the earth to sustain life. Hence the human is in danger of losing his own life and his own humanity. “It is high time that we acknowledged that we are turning our home, this living planet into a wasteland, an unsuitable place for life. If environment degradation continues, we would be killing not only ourselves but also the earth, the only life sustaining system known to us.” (*Joseph Peruma CMF in the Motherly Earth, p.viii*)

It is clear that the current development paradigm promoted through market globalisation, centred on money, creating artificial demands for greater consumption and thrust to monetize natural resources for the stabilization of wealth, power, domination and prestige of a few elites at the helm in the world system, is not only destructive towards the environment but also continues to widen the gap between the rich and poor nations and also between the rich and poor within nations making the poor poorer, leading to more and more social unrest and conflicts. Militarization is the State's response to this manifestation of dissent in collusion with international power. Hence the low-intensity conflict scenario in the newly independent, developing countries, where religious, tribe, ethnic, caste differences and border conflicts become aggravated in a horizontal manifestation of violence, in the context of the helplessness of the marginalized vis a vis the status quo. The world today is thus faced with three major crises: the food crisis, climate crisis and the financial crisis. It is the majority poor and among them, the poorest, who are forced to bear the burden of this triple crisis.

International Responses to the Crisis

It cannot be denied that some effort is being made, with UN Secretary General sounding a warning that climate change could be one of the biggest threats faced by humans. The world is continuing to debate since the Rio Conference in 1992, with no serious emission reduction yet, although many countries except the US had signed the Kyoto Protocol to reduce 5.2% of carbon dioxide emissions of the 1990 level. The UN climate change Conference in December 2007 had set a two year negotiations period – the Bali Road Map, leading to a Conference in December 2009 in Copenhagen, where all parties are expected to agree to a new deal to replace the Kyoto Protocol ending in 2012. It is said that the costs of inaction to cope with global warming far outweighs the costs of moving towards low carbon societies. Yet year in and year out, numerous Conferences are held by world powers to address this urgent preoccupation, but, much to the chagrin of environmentalists and all concerned, no conclusive and committed options are made and strategies worked out to slash green-house gas emissions. The G 8 countries would not hesitate to lay down conditions to emerging economies to adopt actions to reduce heat-trapping gas emissions with no serious commitment on their part to do the same; where as the crisis demands a whole hearted and concerted effort from the whole human family and the community of nations. So far the responses have been within the dominant technocratic mentality, operating within the same closed framework of reference and drawn upon the same fixed premises as the thrust originally responsible for this crisis – through greater scientific ingenuity and more efficient technological management. Conferences are held, money poured into research to find new ways to further control environment and avoid further hazards. Yet many agree that the crisis needs to be faced at a more fundamental level, radically putting into question the human's very way of being in nature.

People's Response

Solidarity is being built in the world to find constructive responses to this crisis. In January this year, the World Social Forum in Belem, Brazil brought together thousands of people from all over the world around the themes of water and earth in a mass manifestation of the world conscience speaking on behalf of mother Earth groaning under the yoke that human's have put on her. The World Theology Forum, meeting at the same venue brought together over fifty theologians from the world over, to ponder on, 'Water, Earth, Theology for another possible World,' searching for a new spirituality and world view to undergird a new way of being on this planet. It was unanimously felt here that those assumptions specific to western industrial society:

- that human progress and happiness lies in the satisfaction of our material wants and sensual desires,
- the basic orientation of the human to nature is one of conflict and struggle aimed at subjugation,
- the insistence of the absolute priority of the human over nature, to the exclusion of all other species and forms had to be questioned radically in envisioning a new ethos of life.

On June 5th this year, commemorating the 'World Environment Day, peoples of the world were mobilised under the theme, 'Your Planet Needs you! Unite to Combat Climate Change'. Thus the

responsibility of every individual and every small community to protect the integrity of the Planet was highlighted focussing on the need to move ahead without waiting for government agencies to take the lead. At the same time the print media gave priority to the endeavours of countries who have launched into creative action: In the Maldives at least one luxury resort with a seven star rating has already gone carbon neutral using deep sea water to cool its air conditioning units and turning its organic waste into fertilizer. When questioned why, the Maldivian vice-president maintained that the time had come for global leadership. Iceland today generates virtually all its energy from geothermal and hydroelectricity and is far ahead of most western nations in the thrust for a cleaner environment. Denmark too has ventured on carbon neutrality, Brazil for biomass as fuel; China has doubled its wind power capacity for five years in a row. These are heartening endeavours but they are short-termed and insufficient to meet this grave crisis brought about by the impact of destructive human activity and intervention on the earth.

New Environmental Vision Imperative

It is generally agreed that never before had humans degraded the earth as now. At the root of this disastrous thrust is the human's dualistic and dichotomized way of thought, objectifying the outside world, making the human the centre of all life and all else subservient to him to be used as he willed. This anthropocentrism and this myopic self preoccupation as individuals and nations have led us to ruthlessly exploit nature on an incessant drive to accumulate, dominate and exert power over all life, other humans and communities. Our compartmentalised approach to knowledge, lack of deeper understanding of space and of a broad historical perspective and comprehensive thinking together with the rapid development of technology had accelerated this reckless destruction of the natural world, heedless of the future, with no concern whatsoever for all other life on this planet. Modernist European philosophy had emphasized the centrality of the human person who alone is in the image of God, promoting horizontal transcendence: human to human for achieving fulfilment. This upheld human existence and experience to the detriment of the natural world. Through colonisation, this modern philosophy has pervaded the globe as well. Ironically, the human's dominating attitude towards nature has extended itself to human, societal and international relationships of domination, so that the world scene today is one of suspicion and fear of one another leading to the proliferation of weapons, nuclear and otherwise. The human then is this earth's biggest problem and is now the biggest threat to nature, human life, civilization, natural and cultural diversity. In the midst of this devastating crisis, our social, cultural, philosophical and religious outlook seems to fail us. The crisis is then not merely environmental, ecological but also cultural and religious and deeply spiritual. It fundamentally questions the civilization we have built, co-opting even religions.

Constructive Movements Towards A New Paradigm

An intense search is underway for alternate world views and philosophies that would enable us to live in greater peace and harmony with nature, with our fellow-beings who share this planet with us and also with our selves. Among the many Movements that endeavour to make new articulations under-lining practical implications for life-giving environmental policies three major global thrusts stand out:

- The Inter-faith Movement
- The Eco-Feminist Movement
- The Indigenous Peoples' Movement.

The Inter-Faith Movement

There is a developing thrust among the different religions in the world towards mutual understanding in dialogue. This is specially so among Christians. On the practical level there may be some convergence in the area of human-rights. Yet one cannot deny the suspicions among non-christian nations, specially the Muslim nations, on the Christian endeavour for dialogue and democracy, considering the dogmatic and negative positions taken by Christians during past centuries and even now, caught up as they are in the web of global power politics. How could we, as followers of Jesus, dispel this scepticism and create a common bonded-ness in the search for a more comprehensive understanding of humans in life - enhancing relationships with all beings? All religions in their original inspiration did promote a more fraternal and

respectful relationship with the cosmos and nature. Yet, almost all civilizations, western or eastern, have given into the power of desire and desire for power within the human, in creating systems and institutions of domination spawning much suffering in nature and in human societies. A total radical turn-around from this present craze and hectic race is the need of the hour.

This propels us to critically examine the fundamental premises in our approach to dialogue with other living-faiths. Could we as Christians move from our fixed positions, beyond our boundaries to reach out humbly to other faiths in deep veneration to touch the divine present in them? As all religions move towards one another in genuine wonderment and awe before the divine revealed in each other's beliefs, would not cross – fertilisation take place among them to find the human's rightful place in creation as a responsible steward and a caretaker, as one among the rest of the species in nature with a sacred responsibility to protect, foster and nurture all life on earth, as God's servant? There is much we could learn from one another to evolve a life fostering philosophy of creation, cosmos, nature and humans in nature in a humble and profound encounter among religions as we celebrate one another's wisdom, insights and contribution to eco-justice and social justice. Could we as Christians be bold enough to step out into the unknown with the unshaken faith of Abraham, for, it is there that God awaits us. Are we able to sit together as equals among other religions sharing the same table/meal? It is only through such profound and equal encounter that we are capable of dreaming new dreams towards new life-giving visions.

The Eco-Feminist Movement

Women's Movements first sprang up in the early sixties in the West as women began to realise the inhumanity of their oppression under the patriarchal system. In their first perception of this long oppression, they identified men as their oppressor, causing much confusion among men, who felt targeted and threatened by women's action. Soon as the women's Movements spread world wide, women began to go into a deeper analysis of their oppression and came to the conclusion that 'patriarchy' was an all pervading system where both women and men were oppressed and alienated from one another through a dominating hierarchical organisation of society. Still, women were very wary of men joining in their struggles and it took some time before women could accept, even men, sympathetic to their cause, into their gatherings and search. At the time, they felt it was the women's task to liberate men as well.

As environmental issues began to come to the fore, women did not take much time to comprehend how intimately related was their oppression to that of nature by the Patriarchal systemic organization of society grounded on a dualistic and dichotomous understanding of reality and life: earth/heaven, male/female, body/soul, material/ spiritual, sacred/profane on a solidly hierarchical foundation. In this hierarchical system of values, whatever is organic, earthy or of the body was placed on a lower rung, being considered to be of a lower nature than that which is of the mind/intellect or of the soul/spirit. Those of lower standing then could be controlled or used at will without any scruple for the simple benefit of the superior category. According to this ideology, women and nature were considered to be organic and earthy and so could be exploited as wished, by a system headed by males who were considered to be intellectual spiritual and strong. This ideology had continued to domesticate women for long years, keeping them docile and voiceless under the burden of oppression through mores, customs, cultural and religious norms and practices. In the same way, Mother Earth had been ruthlessly exploited without a voice being raised for years and years. Hence, the rise of Eco-Feminism, where, women, identifying that it is the birthing, nurturing and life fostering vocation of both women and nature that had made them vulnerable, began to consider the cause of both women and nature to be one and the same, and took up the voice of voiceless Mother Nature as their own.

The word 'Eco-feminism,' was first used in 1974 by the French Françoise d'Eaubonne to describe women's potential to effect environmental change. (*Women and Environment, Women in Action, 4/91,8*). But today, this term is used with a wider meaning to cover the systemic oppression of women and nature and the thrust made by women all over the world in unmasking the myths of domination, exploitation, oppression as also their liberation struggles. Some eco-feminists feel that the solution lies in a cultural response to reclaim and strengthen the spiritual

relationship between nature and the human. Others who emphasize the economic, social and political character of this oppression insist that the struggle should be for liberation and justice. For, both these groups however, there is an undeniable nexus between woman and nature as they are both under relentless oppression and should be freed to be themselves. Asian women maintain that any eco-feminist endeavour should firmly be rooted in this nexus, encompassing social and environmental dimensions. The struggle for liberation needs to be on economic, social and political fronts as well as on the religio-cultural front. Eco-feminist spiritualities evolving from the praxis of women would then be contextual, liberational and inclusive: gender, religions and cultures. Another Case of stepping beyond boundaries!

The aspiration of eco-feminists would be to live together in peace with all, respecting, upholding and defending one another's rights together with men, as one human family. They aspire to be enriched by their diversities in harmonious interaction and mutual support as people, communities and nations. Their desire is to extend this same harmonious and respectful relationship to nature, making use of available resources with reverence and with great responsibility for the well-being of all, preserving the integrity of creation.

Every crisis with all inherent difficulties is pregnant with opportunities and possibilities. As eco-feminists, when women and men, move together with those of other faiths, ideologies, cultures and contexts to evolve an eco-feminist culture and spirituality, the paradigm shifts from that of 'giving birth,' to that of 'giving life,' which is inclusive of both male and female elements of any species, in mutual self giving and receiving.

Indigenous Peoples' Movements

The world's indigenous peoples have suffered much due to colonialism and modernity. Millions of such people and their lands have been denigrated for years. There is a growing mobilisation by these people to recapture their lost heritage and re-constitute their communities to regain their original intimate relationships with nature, while also accepting change for a better and more comfortable life. They have always maintained that nature bespeaks of a sacred presence and it is this that gave meaning to their existence, coloured their lives and attitudes towards their surroundings leading to a spirituality that venerated all nature and beings as sacred, understanding all life as God's own life that God shares with all God's creation and humans. This gift of life was to them a dynamic call to a relationship of oneness and mutuality with all humans, plants, animals and all of nature and the cosmos. They held nature as source of human origins and the context of growth in maturity and spirituality. In 1852, when the US government inquired about buying tribal lands for the newly arriving people, from the Chief Seattle, one of the last spokes-persons of the Paleolithic moral order, this was his reply to the President of the US: "The President in Washington sends word that he wishes to buy our land. But how can you buy or sell the sky? The land? The idea is strange to us. If we do not own the freshness of the air and the sparkle of the water, how can you buy them? Every part of this earth is sacred to my people. Every shining pine needle, every sandy shore, every mist in the dark woods, every meadow, every humming insect. All are holy in the memory and experience of my people." (*Joseph Campbell with Bill Moyers, 'The Power of Myth,' p.34*). Space - land continue to remain central to indigenous people's quest for wholeness of life. In their earnest struggle to protect their lands from exploitative intrusions, they continue to manifest a profound reverence for nature, which for them is not merely land and resources but their very life and culture. To be alienated from ancestral land is death to them, this land which is not a commodity but home, Mother Earth. Listen to the voice of lumads, a Philippino tribal group: "When our bodies are pinched, we hurt. When the land is ravaged it hurts even more. When the land is abused all of us lumads are abused with her." (*Duga-Duga Ng Buhay – Vital Sap of life, p.10*)

All aspects of life are inter-connected and inter-dependent. Air is freely given. "The breath we inhale is one and the same breath we share with all of humanity, all creatures and the cosmos. Every breath is God's own life that comes to us as pure gift! Such a perfect manifestation of the fact, the reality we call life, which God shares with us and all creatures. God's gift to us, constantly calling and drawing us to a relationship of oneness and mutuality with each one, all human beings, all plants and animals and all beings on earth and the whole cosmos. This life-giving breath is the Spirit that calls us into wholeness of being and challenges us to participate in the dynamic process of cosmic inter-relatedness. This single breath vivifies our 'sangha,' in alive-

oneness instead of shattered-ness in the community of all creation; unifies out of multiplicity and chaos; integrates us into the rhythmic flow of transformation and change. ... Our breath reveals to us profound truths about living and being, which is what spirituality is all about. ... The continuous inflow of oxygen and outflow of carbon dioxide teaches us about God's economy where nothing is wasted and all is shared freely. There is a constant exchange where plants provide what we need and we give what they need to live. Our breathing shows us that life is a rhythmic give and take." (*Sister Mary Rosario Battung,RGS; Becoming One Breath with Humanity and the Cosmos,P.1*)

There is great interest shown at present on Indigenous Peoples, their cultures and religions. It is important to note that we have been impoverished by our disregard for the contribution that indigenous religious traditions could offer the human spiritual search. They could provide such enrichment to our own religious perspectives. We need to once more step beyond our boundaries to open ourselves in depth to their insights that enabled them to orient and live their lives in harmony with nature, expressing them-selves so creatively in symbol, art and metaphor. "It is by means of the symbolism of religious phenomena that people express this inter-relationship with others, with nature and with that invisible power which metaphorically represents their concept of divinity. In this way their lives become filled with content and true humanity." (*S.A. Thorpe, Primal Religions Worldwide,p.120*).

Towards an Earth Oriented Spirituality

A new approach to life and relationships is urgently called for in meeting this deeply spiritual crisis. The Holy Bible affirms the goodness and sacredness of God's creation that God continues to sustain. According to psalm 19, 'The heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.' Psalms 24 and 64 speak of God's solicitude for the earth. "But even the Bible is clear on the fact that the *raison d'être* of creation is not found primarily in its ability to meet human needs. It has its own dignity, own rights and reasons for being, quite apart from its role in sustaining humans. (*Sean McDonagh in Passion for the Earth, p.140*). Tragically, down the ages, in our intellectual and ideological pursuits we have ignored this truth: that creation is the first symbol of divine manifestation and so the first sacrament and source of revelation. (*psalms 33,90,102*) . As Thomas Berry, a catholic theologian puts it, "We cannot discover ourselves without first discovering the Universe, the Earth and the imperatives of our own being." (*Thomas Berry in Dream of the Earth, p.125*). "All creation is eagerly expecting the transformation of the children of God... however, a hope; for the created world will be freed from this fate of death and share the freedom and the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pangs of birth. Not creation alone, but even ourselves, although the Spirit was given to us as a foretaste of what we are to receive, we groan in our innermost being, eagerly awaiting the day when God will adopt us." (*Rm. 8*). These insights of Paul amply manifest his belief that human destiny in the wisdom of God, is intimately tied to that of the whole of creation, in travail under the process of becoming. It is only then that we together with creation can truly cry out, "Abba, Father," as Jesus has taught us.

Jesus' vision of God's reign is wholeness, 'shalom' to and communion among all God's creatures. "For those who follow Jesus, not self-interest but respect for all of God's creatures is what should hold sway." (*Elizabeth A. Johnson in Consider Christ, p.140*). The parables that Jesus related to bring home to people the message of God's Good News, manifest clearly the intimacy that Jesus had with nature, his understanding of nature's way. Mathew in Chapter 8 places before us the scene of Jesus calming the storm. Does not this scenario show us the intimate and loving relationship that Jesus had with the forces of nature, that they yielded to his request? The Gospels show that the attitude of Jesus to nature was that of wonderment, appreciation and intimate communion . Jesus retired to the wilderness, the desert, the Mountain top, the Garden of Olives whenever he wished to commune with God, his Father, usually before launching into his life's important tasks. We, who aspire to follow in the foot prints of Jesus, need to learn to stand in awe before creation to be able to discover and enter into communion with God, present in God's creation.

After his Baptism in the Jordon, Jesus retires to the desert for forty days to commune with his Father in solitude, before starting his public life. (*Mth.4:1, Lk.4:1*). After he had fasted for forty days, the Gospels tell us, the devil attempted to tempt him in three crucial ways that we

ourselves are tested in our worldly sojourn. The first one is to make use of his power to change the stone into bread and satisfy his human need, hunger: yes the exploitation of material goods to satisfy human needs, let alone greed; Jesus by his response showed that it was far more important to live by God's word than to satisfy one's needs. The second incident shows that Jesus was tempted on another human craving, that of prestige; to jump down from the highest point of the temple, so that people seeing God rescuing him from his plight, would acclaim him as the chosen one of God. Jesus refuses with the words, "You shall not challenge the Lord your God." Words full of depth to ponder on!

The third picture is of Jesus being taken to the top of a mountain, shown all the beauty and wealth in nature and all the nations of the world, with a desire to have power over all, by worshipping Satan. Jesus does not yield to this temptation with the words, "Worship the Lord Your God and serve him only." These temptations of Jesus in the desert show us that humans could not attribute to themselves the power that belongs to God only. The Human vocation is not to use God's creation for satisfying his needs and his cravings to possess, have prestige and exercise power over creation and other beings. On the contrary, the human's sacred responsibility is to discover God in God's creation, sing the glory of God with all of God's creation and serve God by being God's own caretaker of God's creation that God was directing to its fulfilment in God. Have we humans not deviated from this sacred trust? The life of Jesus as narrated in the Gospels empowers us poor humans, to move away with hope from this urge to lord it over and rape nature and all God's creatures in the search for 'mammon.' Jesus vision of unconditional love includes wholeness for all creatures, even the least important, the non-human. He lived lightly, characterized by simplicity of life and warned us against getting enticed by all these cravings. (*Mth.6: 19-21*).

The Church, in its institutionalization has lost of the track that the natural world is the primary symbol of the sacred, with its adherence to that which is sacred and that which is profane. Though the efforts of the Church on social justice and human rights are commendable, the Church has been rather slow to grasp the seriousness and urgency of ecological issues. However in a document that Pope John Paul II put out in January 1990, "Peace with God the Creator, Peace with all creation," the Pope tried to awaken the conscience of the world on the ravages caused to this planet. He stressed therein the responsibility of Christians to care for the earth: "Christians, in particular, realize that their responsibility within creation and their duty towards nature and the Creator are an essential part of their faith." On January 17th, 2001 he called for an ecological conversion in the words, "We must therefore encourage and support the 'ecological conversion,' which in recent decades has made humanity more sensitive to the catastrophe to which it has been heading." Further John Paul II in *Evangelium Vitae* No. 42 reminds us, "As one called to till and look after the garden of the world, (*Gen.2:15*) man has a specific responsibility towards the environment in which he lives, towards the creation which God has put at the service of his personal dignity, of his life, not only for the present but also for the future generations. It is the ecological question – ranging from the preservation of natural habitants of the different species of animals and other forms of life to 'human ecology,' properly speaking – which finds in the Bible clear and strong ethical direction leading to a solution which respects the good of life, of every life. When it comes to the natural world, we are subject not only to biological laws but also to moral ones, which cannot be violated."

The Franciscan Challenge, Contribution

Our Father St. Francis is universally hailed as the man of nature. As we ponder on the life of Francis what strikes us most is that as Francis grew up in the beautiful countryside of Assisi, he developed a great love for the natural world, the rivers, the forests, the mountains etc. As a carefree young son of a rich merchant, with the wealth of his father at his beck and call, the joyful troubadour, Francis roamed the streets of Assisi with his young friends singing to the birds, flowers, sky, sea, expressing the sheer joy of living. He envisioned greatness, he longed for prestige, which in some way he had among his youthful friends. Yet his yearning for prestige led him to join the warring factions in his war-torn milieu, taking the side of one of the nobles. Imprisoned for one year after the battle of Perugia, he was a leader even in prison bringing joy to other prisoners by his gaiety. Yet freed from prison, he realised that those things that had appealed to him previously seemed to have less appeal now. A second time going to war in Apulia, he had a dream in Spoleto in which a voice asks him, "Who can give you more, the Lord

or the servant?" When Francis' replied that it was the Lord, the voice asks, "Then why do you leave the Lord for the servant?" Quite within the yearnings of young Francis for glory. And Francis' reply, "Lord what will you have me to do?" Quite the response that a man of faith would give! He returned to Assisi as the voice had requested of him. There begins his search but, unfortunately there were no further dreams, no guidance, but perfect silence, emptiness!

Groping in the dark with trepidation and sometimes full of doubts, Francis, falls back into his former care-free life with his friends for a while, but with a certain difference. At the sumptuous meal he had arranged for his friends one evening he suddenly disappears. On searching for him, his friends find him in the midst of nature silently absorbed gazing into the night and they surmised that perhaps he had found the lady of his dreams. Yes, he would acknowledge that he had found the loveliest and most noble lady – the Lady Poverty. But, they did not grasp what he meant. From then on, he withdraws more and more from their company, becomes generous to the poor, begins to roam the hill sides, spends long solitary hours in caves, mountain slopes, trying to understand this inner restlessness and force within, struggling to respond to this urge that was touching his heart strings. It was face to face with the divine in creation, that Francis realised that the crucified one was moving him to deny himself, take up his cross and follow in his foot-prints. Thus he was now ready for this crucial turning point in his life - the encounter with the leper, someone from whom he normally turned away in great abhorrence. In kissing the leper and in being kissed by the leper, Francis' whole being overflows with such sweetness, that he firmly puts his feet on the path of 'metanoia,' heedless of the ridicule, the wrath, the persecution he faced from his near and dear ones. Francis had now taken the vital, critical first step to go beyond his boundaries and from then on, he was able to run in leaps and bounds with great joy along the path of true freedom. He puts himself whole heartedly to taking care of lepers, and gradually emptying himself, what was formerly bitter to him became a source of great joy. Summoned by Bishop Guido to face his disillusioned, outraged father, Francis, returns to his father not only the money he had taken from him but also stripped himself naked, handing his clothes back to his father proclaiming with determination that from then on he could truly say, 'Our Father in heaven.' Another decisive step in crossing the boundaries of wealth, security, prestige and power! Accepting the joy of poverty in the ardour of love burning deep within him (Mth.19:21) "If you would be perfect...". For Francis, poverty was a running stream of child-like trust flowing into the ocean of God's providence. Embracing poverty in freedom and joy, filled and led by God's Spirit, Francis began to grow in Christ life. Freed from worldly attachments, Francis now has his feet firmly on the path of total surrender, facing the unknown with great trust in 'Abba,' his Father, who led him on the path to reconciliation and communion with all of life.

The world has now become to Francis, his home. He had no other home but God's own creation! Freely he roams chilly slopes, snow capped mountains, verdant valleys, marvelling at the wonders of God's creation, singing the glory of God, enjoying the freedom of the beatitudes, building an even closer affinity with all of creation. In discovering the transcendent within and beyond nature, Francis could touch the divine present within himself in a more concrete way to re-interpret the meaning of his own life within the mystery of God's own creation and being. In this deep experience of communion, was Francis able to give expression to his unique spirituality and mission. "This great love for the natural world shaped the identity of Francis, the expression of his spirituality and mission. There are many stories of Francis and his encounters with the natural world: with animals, birds, fish and even insects. He walked reverently on stones; he rejoiced in the sounds of running water or blowing wind. Francis had a special love for living creatures, and they seemed to sense in him a gentle, loving presence. Above all, as Francis' turning to God unfolded and he was gripped by the fact of the incarnation, nature became holy for him. Everything created by God had also been touched by the Word made flesh. Francis then, was not only a lover of nature and a poet who saw great beauty in all that was around him. Much more deeply, he was enthralled by God's presence in the created order." (*Marie Dennis, Joseph Nangle, OFM, Cythia Moe-Lobeda, Stuart Taylor in St. Francis and the Foolishness of God, p.105*). He had given up everything, not as renunciation but through an ardent love and yet, had found all in God's creation, in intimate communion in deep minority, fully aware of his place as one of God's creatures in God's Cosmos.

Celano in XXI: 53-54, relates in a fascinating manner how Francis greeted a great number of different kinds of birds gathered together near Bevagna and spoke to them of God, then blessed

them before sending them away. Francis had learnt to commune with birds as also with plants, flowers, trees, corn fields, vineyards, stones, forests, water wind air etc. Thomas Berry, a creative catholic thinker of our times stresses the need for earth centred language. "We are learning the mountain languages, the river language, tree language, the language of the birds and all the animals and insects as well as the stars of the heavens. The capacity for understanding and communicating through these languages, until now enjoyed by our poets and mystics, is of immense significance since so much of life is lived in association with other beings of the universe." (*Thomas Berry, The 'Ecozoic Period' quoted by Paul Collins in God's Earth, p.162*) Had not our father St. Francis mastered this art of communication?

"In every work of the artist he praised the artist; whatever he found in the things made he referred to the Maker. He rejoiced in all the works of the hands of the Lord and saw behind things pleasant to behold their life-giving reason and cause. In beautiful things, he saw Beauty itself; all things were to him good. "He who made us is the best," they cried out to him. Through his footprints impressed upon things he followed the Beloved everywhere; he made for himself from all things a ladder by which to come even to his throne ... for that original goodness that will be one day all things in all, already shown forth in this saint - all things in all. (*Celano, CXXIV, 269-270*) Francis lived a sense of ecstatic union with God in nature that made him regard everything as sacred, going beyond the prevalent boundaries of sacred and profane. His Canticle of Creatures celebrates creation and our destiny as walking in paradise in communion with all of creation, being agents of the new creation that is coming to be. (*Rev. 21*) Celano says that Francis had already escaped into the freedom of the glory of God because of his transformation through harmonious communion with all of God's creatures.

The first companions of Francis in forming their first community were committed to following in the footprints of Jesus, stripping themselves of self and all attachments through love, inspired by the example of Francis. Contemplating God in nature, they discovered their one-ness with all of life which led them to be a community of joyful brothers living in mutual bondedness with one another and with all of God's creatures, giving themselves to the service of especially, the outcaste, the despised, the helpless and to the reign of God, as minors, not lording it over others or over nature. Their life was a blatant contradiction to the way of life and values upheld by the feudal society of that time. Through this communion, in poverty, and the joy and dynamism of brotherly concern for all of life, they strove to bring the world to Christ and Christ to the world.

Conclusion

Nature is groaning under the yoke that humans continue to put on her. It is clear that governments, business people, industrialists, elites and intellectuals engrossed in their petty interests cannot respond with vision and courage to environmental issues. Further, short term and short sighted responses are insufficient. For genuine justice in society there needs to be justice towards creation. I still hear the voice of Marcus Briggs, the young Ameri-Indian at the World Theology Conference in Belem, telling us all that he could not go along with our eco -paradigm which was self centred in the sense that our concern for ecology was basically because of the threat to human life. We need to go beyond this boundary as well, to find a new ecological vision and ethos. A meta-narrative or an overall understanding of all life and the cosmos is needed, beyond the boundaries of our present understanding of the world, life and ourselves in relation to nature, to evolve a life-giving response to the eco-crisis and bring about a radical change in the human's way of being in the world. Change is difficult to come by, unless people are convinced and are collectively moved to bring about change. A deep interior change of attitude is called for ,and so, it is a profound spiritual endeavour.

"Trinitarian theology/spirituality points to the radical communal nature of God. This communion overflows into an involvement with history and aims at drawing humanity and creation in general into this communion with God's very life. God's very nature therefore is missionary. It is not primarily about the propagation or transmission of intellectual convictions, doctrines, moral commands etc. but rather about the inclusion of all creation in God's overflowing superabundant life of communion. The Church's missionary nature derives from its participation in this overflowing Trinitarian life." (*Bevans and Schoeder,2004 ,288-289*).

We, Franciscans, who share in this marvellous, all encompassing Charism of Our Father St. Francis are definitely challenged by the signs of the times and called to respond creatively to the

human search for a new eco-centred world view and way of life. In what better way could we respond to this vital human quest of our times, except by opening ourselves out to the action of God's Spirit moving within and among us to bring about God's New Creation, Communion, by the full blooming of this our Charism in unique and diverse ways in us, as individuals and communities spread throughout the world, to become a candle, lighted to dispel the darkness?

The Franciscan Movement brings together women and men from all nations in a common striving towards liberation from all worldly and human cravings through deep communion with the Divine present in creation. Bonded together in the spiritual dynamism of a common vision and mission, to give life to this transformed relationship so wonderfully expressed in the Canticle of Creation of our Father Francis, where all creation becomes brother and sister to them, they reveal to the world the core of the Franciscan World View – walk the earth with reverence, humility and gratitude, aware of our significance only as another species among God's variety of species in inter-dependence and inter-connectedness within the intricate web of life, where God will be all in all.

**“ Most High, all powerful, all good Lord!
All praise is yours, all glory, all honour and blessing,
To you alone, Most high, do they belong.
All praise be yours, my Lord, through all that you have made...”**

Sr. Marlene Perera, fmm. Sri Lanka.

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