How the world will come to an end – or how we can save ourselves and our common home

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In a talk earlier this month for Jesuit Missions, Fr Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator SJ considered the need to act both individually and collectively to respond to the challenge of climate change, which will be at the forefront of the discussions at COP26 in Glasgow in November 2021. He explored the way in which *Caritas in veritate*, *Laudato si'* and African religious traditions all express a belief that the natural world is 'a revelatory text of the actions of God who triumphs over death to save both humankind and the Earth.'

A fire broke out backstage in a theatre. The clown came out to warn the public; they thought it was a joke and applauded. He repeated it; the acclaim was even greater. I think that's just how the world will come to an end: to general applause from wits who believe it's a joke.

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This terse and unsettling characterisation by the 19th century Danish philosopher, theologian and cynic, Søren Kierkegaard, offers a fitting allegory for our present predicament of global warming and climate change, and the attendant peril to this Earth, our common home.

There was a time, even during my lifetime, when predictions about the consequences of climate emergencies sounded like storylines about a fictional future. Drawing on imaginative assumptions, philosophical hypotheses and scientific modelling, and with confidence tinged with hubris, we could tell stories about how things would change in the distant future.

On the eve of the United Nations Climate Change Conference, also known as the 'Conference of the Parties' (COP26), the deafening protest of climate activists and the growing stridency of environmental scientists and analysts awaken us to the reality that the future of our planet is now – this was confirmed with the award of the 2021 Nobel Prize in Physics to three scientists for their work to understand complex systems, such as the Earth's climate, that can predict the impact of global warming.

The latest summary of the evidence on climate change and the scientific data produced by the authoritative Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), points to a frightening conclusion, which UN Secretary-General António Guterres dubbed 'a code red for humanity'. Such findings lend relevance to Saint Paul's assessment of the signs of the times in his era: 'For the world as it now exists is passing away.' (1 Cor 7:31). Yet the response of global leaders seems redolent of the 'general

applause' of indifference and thoughtlessness displayed by Kierkegaard's clowning audience. Recently, Greta Thunberg satirised their empty rhetoric in the face of 'a man-made disaster of global scale. Our greatest threat in thousands of years,'[1] to quote naturalist Sir David Attenborough: 'Blah, blah, blah….'

Climate is replacing conflict as a formidable driver of humanitarian catastrophes through severe weather events, demonstrating again and again the irrational logic of shifts in climate patterns that lay the brunt of the impact on vulnerable and poorer populations whose activities contribute the least to climate change.

Common to current approaches is the belief that the right combination of science and technology offers the key to saving planet earth. True. But neither science nor technology goes to confession. We need to explore an alternative order of priorities, criteria and principles. One such line of thought derives from the idea of 'interdependence of forces' in African philosophical and religious traditions, and its concomitant communal ethics of ecological solidarity, stewardship and gratitude to meet the challenge of climate change.

To elucidate this idea, I would like to recall Pope Benedict XVI's encyclical *Caritas in veritate* (2009), on integral human development, where he argues that dysfunctional models and practices of development pose a threat to 'the earth's state of ecological health' (*Caritas in veritate [CV]* §32). Benedict anchors his argument in the claim that the human person is the measure, driver and goal of development, whose objective is also vitally linked to the reverence for the means of sustaining human life in the ecological realm. He then notes that: 'The way humanity treats the environment influences the way it treats itself, and vice versa' (*CV* §51).

I find that notions native to African religious traditions blend well with Benedict's pivotal teaching that the 'book of nature' comprises not just the 'environmental ecology' but, more critically, the 'human ecology' (*CV* §51), both of which form incontrovertible constants of integral human development. As he put it: 'Just as human virtues are interrelated, such that the weakening of one places others at risk, so the ecological system is based on respect for a plan that affects both the health of society and its good relationship with nature' (*CV* §51).

Caritas in veritate correctly notes the temptation to 'view nature as something more important than the human person. This position leads to attitudes of neo-paganism or a new pantheism' (*CV* §48). Often viewed against this backdrop are African indigenous religious traditions which consider the realm of the natural environment as charged with and inhabited by a multiplicity of spirits. This can lead to those indigenous African beliefs that underpin respect for environmental ecology being prejudicially construed as 'Neopaganism,' 'pantheism' or 'animism.' This prejudice misses the point.

The vital connection that Benedict establishes between 'environmental ecology' and 'human ecology' aligns well with what foremost African theologian Bénézet Bujo describes as the 'interdependence of forces' between the human person and the earth, which allows each to influence the other. Such is the intensity of this vital connection that 'one can only save oneself by saving the earth.' This interdependent approach to 'environmental ecology' translates into a uniquely African spirituality and practice vis-à-vis the created world in which the latter acquires a sacramental dimension as a revelatory text of the actions of God who triumphs over death to save both humankind and the Earth.

This spirituality engenders an ethical imperative of reverence for nature, whether human or environmental, and contains a powerful reminder that the duty to protect and preserve 'environmental ecology' and 'human ecology' derives from their constitution 'not only by matter but also by spirit' (*CV* §48). At its best, the notion of 'interdependence of forces' concurs with Christianity's deepest truths that recognise creation as 'the wonderful result of God's creative activity, which we may use responsibly to satisfy our legitimate needs, material or otherwise, while respecting the intrinsic balance of creation' (*CV* §48).

My point is that, besides science and technology, the imperative to correct the catastrophic global course of current climate predicament requires a capacity to perceive the agony of the Earth as the flip side of the anguish of humanity. For, as an African proverb says, 'a chicken develops a headache when it sees another chicken inside the cooking pot.' Pope Francis captures this logic of environmental intimacy by reminding us in *Laudato si'* that: 'Our 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' (*Laudato si' [LS]* §119).

As I see it, this ecological interdependence is rooted in the principles of the common good and social justice. Francis explicitly makes the claim that: 'The human environment and the natural environment deteriorate together; we cannot adequately combat environmental degradation unless we attend to causes related to human and social degradation' (*LS* §48). In other words, the degree to which we are successful in redeeming our socioeconomic dysfunctionality is an indicator of our overall ecological health and wellbeing. If we desire to be saved, we should wish, hope and act for no less for our planet.

I am persuaded that the series of environmental catastrophes witnessed in recent times are consequences of anthropogenic climate change. Extreme meteorological events, such as heat waves, droughts, forest fires and floods, in some instances with unprecedented ferocious intensity, tragically evoke the 'intimate relationship between the poor [of this world] and the fragility of the planet' (*LS* §16). Thus, as we damage our planet we also blight the lives of poor and vulnerable people and their communities. The argument in reverse should not be a complicated one, namely, that as we attend to the needs of the poor and vulnerable populations in charity and in justice, we potentially heal the planet.

For people who perceive and understand that there is no injustice quite so appalling and alarming as that visited on planet Earth by human beings, *Laudato si'* offers a prophetic proclamation of faith: that this Earth, our Mother, is a gift; it is the outcome of an intentional act by a loving God who is deeply involved and invested in the destiny of the Earth (*LS* §§67, 220). Our moral response to this gift includes a duty of care and a practice of 'stewardship' that seeks not solely to exploit the resources of nature and extract value at all cost, but desires primarily to care for and preserve creation.

Whether we profess religious faith or not, planet Earth is not the product of an act sequestered in an impenetrable and irretrievable cosmic past. This Earth, our common home, represents an enterprise continually being fulfilled, in mutuality and reciprocity. Therefore, the focus need not dwell on how the Earth came into being but on how 'to ensure its fruitfulness for coming generations' (*LS* §67).

To return to Kierkegaard's clown: to disregard the body of evidence on anthropogenic climate change is to risk settling for what Pope Francis describes as a 'globalization of indifference' (*LS* §53) and a 'collective selfishness' that only aggravate the crisis. If the pope is right, such indiff-

erence and selfishness pose the greatest challenge to any initiative to mitigate and reverse the damage inflicted on our common home.

For it is in the nature of indifference to dispense with '… that sense of responsibility for our fellow men and women upon which all civil society is founded' (*LS* §25) and it is characteristic of selfishness and greed for 'some [people to] consider themselves more human than others, as if they had been born with greater rights' (*LS* §90). Either way, Pope Francis' message is clear and decisive: if we capitulate to indifference and selfishness, we become culpable, 'silent witnesses to terrible [ecological] injustices' (*LS* §36).

The point of all this is the truth that individually and collectively we are not bound inexorably to a practice of ecological violence. We can chart a different course, we can embark on a path of care, healing and protection of Mother Earth. We can save ourselves and our common home.

Key to this new course is the understanding that protecting, caring for and healing the Earth is primarily about protecting, caring for and healing humanity, because how we treat Mother Earth is a reliable measure of how we treat ourselves. In the context of the present ecological crises, the commitment to healing the Earth must now shift the narrative from threat of destruction to the promise of survival and action towards the flourishing of the biosphere.

I hold the firm conviction that the ecological crisis of our times does not leave us bereft of ideas and initiatives. As *Laudato si'* reassures, we can all do something. We can all make a difference. If Pope Francis is to be believed, every human person is part of the unfolding drama of climate change, hence the necessity, as he puts it, to become protagonists of 'small everyday things' and 'little everyday gestures' (*LS* §231); practitioners of 'simple daily gestures' (*LS* §230) and 'small gestures of mutual care' (*LS* §231).

This idea of enlisting as protagonists of 'little everyday gestures' or practitioners of 'small gestures of mutual care' on behalf of our planet was already poignantly formulated and articulated by the late Kenyan Nobel Laureate for Peace, Wangari Muta Maathai, long before the arrival of Pope Francis as a visionary and prophetic global champion of environmental justice. Wangari Maathai believed deeply that:

> today we are faced with a challenge that calls for a shift in our thinking, so that humanity stops threatening its life-support system. We are called to assist the Earth to heal her wounds and in the process heal our own – indeed to embrace the whole of creation in all its diversity, beauty and wonder.[2]

Wangari would have agreed wholeheartedly with naturalist Sir David Attenborough that: 'If we don't take action, the collapse of our civilisations and the extinction of much of the natural world is on the horizon.'[3]

With the keen awareness that, 'the generation that destroys the environment is not the generation that pays the price,' Wangari Maathai resolved to do something about it. 'It's the little things citizens do. That's what will make the difference,' she declared. 'My little thing is planting trees'. By the time of her death, Wangari Maathai had mobilised Kenyans to plant more than 30 million trees. Also, owing to her influence, a UN programme led to the planting of over 10 billion trees. Her example remains an inspiration and a lesson on how we can save ourselves and our common home.

Rather than join in the general applause of news of a devastating climate change she opted to heal humanity by healing our common home. Therein lies the true allegory and an ethical warrant for confronting our 'man-made disaster of global scale. Our greatest threat in thousands of years'.

I'd like to end with a postscript.

The distinguished professor of history, Phillip Jenkins, has predicted that 'a near-certain consequence of a climate-driven disaster will be a quest for the malefactors thought to be responsible' and 'a powerful thirst for religious explanations of the ongoing disasters' ('Climate catastrophe and the future of faiths,' *The Tablet*, 25 September 2021). Although Jenkins's argument is compelling, he overlooks the fact that the context of the 14th century is a distant past to our highly globalised and networked world. When it comes to explanations of the ongoing climate-driven catastrophes, we know the enemy: the enemy is us. This is 'unequivocal' and 'an established fact,' according to the latest IPCC report. The gods are not to blame.

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Listen to a recording of the talk on which this article is based, which was delivered on 5 October 2021, at: https://jesuitmissions.org.uk/fr-orobator-on-saving-our-common-home/

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[1] Matt McGrath, 'Sir David Attenborough: Climate change "our greatest threat"', BBC (3 December 2018): https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-46398057

[2] Wangari Maathai, Nobel Lecture (Oslo, 10 December 2004): https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/2004/maathai/26050-wangari-maathai-nobel-lecture-2004/

[3] McGrath, *op. cit.*