

# Ethical Response to Ecological Challenges: A Call to Responsible Stewardship

*Anthonya Bolante Ojo*

## **Abstract**

The issues pertaining to ecology, that is, the world of our natural environment, have become matters of serious concern in the contemporary world. The future of the earth is in question and our planet runs the risk of total extinction due to the inordinate ambition and greed of humans who violate all ethical norms to the detriment of common good. At creation, God gave the created world to the human person as gift for self-sustenance and preservation (cf. Gen 1:28). However, in the contemporary age, the human person continues to use and misuse this gift without maintaining and developing it. This has resulted in ecological crisis which is a global challenge in this age. The abuse of this sacred gift could be attributed to lack of proper understanding of the authority given over the created earth. This paper, therefore, stresses that inasmuch as human beings have the right to use the goods of the earth for their own sustenance and development, they equally have the duty to maintain and preserve it. Hence, the human person becomes a steward who is responsible for the good of the earth. It thus argues that both personal and collective environmental stewardship by human beings will lead to sustainable development which will aim at achieving the purpose of creation, that is, the good of all.

**Keywords:** common good, earth, ecology, ethics, stewardship, sustainable development

## **Introduction**

The concept of environmental stewardship originates first and foremost from creation stories, in which God gives humans dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and the animals of the land (cf. Gen 1: 28) and the command in Gen 2:15 to “cultivate and care” for the land. These Bible passages reveal God as the Creator and owner of the universe but in his benevolence has given the human beings the privilege to utilise all he has created for their own good. Still, the passages teach that each individual has a vitally important role to play as a steward in God's domain. This stewardship includes both the proper use and conservation of natural and human resources in a way that brings glory to God and furthers His purposes in the world. Therefore, the earth which Pope Francis in his Encyclical *Laudato Si* refers to as “our common home” (no. 1) is a gift from

God the Creator to human beings to till and to keep. This is a divine mandate which calls the human persons to be stewards of creation and not the owner.

Stewardship is a term that refers to the responsibility of a steward to manage wisely the goods and property of another. A steward is, therefore, not an owner, but one who has a responsibility to an owner to treat property with care and respect. Stewardship has come to be used in the Christian theology in a broader sense emphasising both our personal and collective responsibility to care wisely for God's creation. The assumption is that human beings do not really possess or own anything; rather, the world, including human beings belong to God. In view of this, Bugg (2001) defines stewardship as "utilising and managing all resources God provides for the glory of God and the betterment of his creation" (p. 1303). Hence, stewardship begins and ends with the understanding of God's ownership of all; for "The Earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it" (Psalm 24:1). Therefore, human beings are not owners but stewards of all that comes into their arena of responsibility - income, assets, property, goods, time, talents, and their very selves.

The divine mandate to till and keep the earth (cf. Gen 2:15) aims at achieving ecological balance. It charges humans with a two-tier responsibility: on the one hand, human beings have the responsibility to produce things in cooperation with nature; and, on the other hand, they have a great responsibility of maintaining the world with its ecological balance. Consequently, ecological balance is not only to protect nature, but also to sustain it (Alangaram, 2015). Little wonder the whole world today talks about sustainability development which has to do with one's moral obligation to future generations with respect to the environment.

Unfortunately, the contemporary world has deviated from the real meaning of dominion as a responsibility to mean selfish use and abuse of the resources of the earth. Many people base their argument of the misuse of the earthly goods on the dominion and domination of Gen 1:28-29 with the claim that God has given human beings authority over the created world to subdue it. However, John Paul II (1998) points out that the distorted notion of human dominion can be attributed to self-interest and greed of the human person wanting excessive acquisition of material things at the expense of the world's natural wealth. This distorted notion is also influenced by the rise of scientific research and technological advancement (*Fides et Ratio*, no. 15). Information technology, biotechnology, nuclear energy, industrialisation and many other abilities have given the human person an impressive dominance over the whole of humanity and the entire world (*Laudato Si*, no. 105).

The consequence of this is the disruption of the original harmony that should exist between humanity and nature with its resultant ecological crisis such as:

deforestation, pollution, etc. This has led to devastation of the environment. This made Prophet Hosea to lament: "Therefore the land mourns and all who dwell in it languish, and also the beasts of the field and the birds of the air and even the fish of the sea are taken away" (Hosea, 4:3). A proper understanding of dominion shows that human beings are to respect nature as God's creation. Based on this backdrop, this paper, discusses the ethical relevance of human responsibility toward the earth by looking at God's plan for creation, the ecological crisis brought about through the misuse and abuse of creation, the Christian understanding of dominion and domination, and ethical relevance of ecological responsibility of humans. This paper argues that if all human beings that have been charged with the task to care for the earth as our common home should build a new culture of care, responsibility and sensitivity towards the earth, this will reverse the present ecological crises that threaten the whole world and will help achieve the purpose of creation.

### **God's plan for creation**

As mentioned above, at the foundation of the discussion on ecological issues is the fact that creation is a gift from God to humanity, to till and subdue (cf. Gen. 2:15). The earth was given to human beings by God the Creator to inhabit with creativity and responsibility. The creation story shows that the Creator looked upon his creation and "saw that it was good" (Gen. 1:4; 1:10; 1:12; 1:18; 1:21; 1:25). It also reveals to us that not only is everything God created good, but also that creation itself reflects the magnificence of God. The Psalmist eloquently describes a profound experience of God's creative power and a sense of the awesome responsibility of the human creature thus:

When I see the heavens, the work of your hands, the moon and the stars which you arranged, what is man that you should keep him in mind, mortal man that you care for him? Yet you have made him little less than a god, with glory and honour you crowned him, gave him power over the works of your hand, put all things under his feet. All of them, sheep and cattle, yes, even the savage beasts – birds of the air, and fish that make their way through the waters (Psalm 8:3-8).

Nevertheless, it is God's creation of humankind that completes the created order in such a way that he pronounces it to be "very good" (Gen. 1:31) being created in his own image and likeness (Fern, 2002). Created in the image of God and being placed in the midst of God's creation, God "sets human being apart for himself and gives them a special responsibility and authority. He/she is given the authority and task to 'represent' God in creation so that God continues to sustain His creation in the best possible manner giving him/her intelligence and creativity to do so" (Hefner, 1998, p. 184). This is explicit in the words of Moltmann (1985) when he refers to human beings as a 'proxy' of God. He writes, "As God's image, human beings are God's proxy in his creation, and represent

him. As God's image, human beings are for God himself a counterpart, in whom he desires to see himself as if in a mirror" (p. 188).

In the same vein, the Catechism of the Catholic Church explicitly states: "Man is the summit of the Creator's work, as the inspired account expresses by clearly distinguishing the creation of man from that of the other creatures" (2002, p. 383). As the summit of God's creation, man reflects God in a most excellent way, and as the image of God, human beings have the capacity for reason, which enables them to know God, the world, and themselves. They are also endowed with the powers of freedom and imagination that allow them to reflect upon their experiences, choose a course of action, and thus become co-operators in the work of creation. Hence, they become co-creators with God. This privilege bestows on them a dignity that surpasses other creatures precisely because they can participate spiritually in God's creativity in a manner that far exceeds the merely physical capabilities of other creatures.

It follows, then, that with such capabilities, and by virtue of human dignity, God placed human beings in governance over his creation: "Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth" (Gen. 1:26). This dominion was specified as a command to "till and keep" the garden (Gen. 2:15). By the command of the Lord to till and keep the garden, it can be assumed that human beings were commanded to use their rationality in the governance of creation for the sake of bringing forth fruit from the earth and to be responsible for its continuity. The earth is essentially a shared inheritance whose fruits are meant to benefit everyone. This shows that God's plan for creation is to provide human beings with the means for sustaining and enhancing their existence. However, for the earth to be of benefit to humanity, the human person will have to take good care of it. In order to discharge this responsibility properly as good stewards, a clear understanding of what dominion means is essential.

### **Christian understanding of 'dominion' and 'domination'**

In his analysis of the book of Genesis, Westermann (2004) points out that the Hebrew verbs used in Gen 1:28 for 'subduing' the earth and having 'dominion' over other creatures are *kabash* and *radah* respectively. These mean bringing the earth under the control of human being because the Hebrew verb *Kabash* literally means to 'tread down' or 'bring into bondage'; and *radah* would mean to 'trample' or to 'prevail against'. Hence, the human persons are given a mandate by God to exercise some kind of 'sovereignty' over the rest of creation. He explains further that the verbs used in Gen 1:28 are used particularly in terms of kingly rule and his exercise of dominion. Thus, that alone would not give way for a whimsical way of exercising dominion, bringing harm to whatever is placed under one's rule. In addition, Westermann (2004) writes that, "according to ancient view, however, there is no suggestion of exploitation; on the contrary,

the king is personally responsible for the well-being and prosperity of those he rules. His rule serves the well-being of his subjects." (p. 159). Therefore 'ruling over' would mean taking care and providing for the welfare and prosperity of that which is placed under, and anyway of selfish exploitation or abuse would result in the loss of kingly power.

Christian interpretation of the Genesis account, then, does not suggest any exploitation or domineering and destructive action on the part of the human person; rather, the mandate to 'till' and 'keep' implies that the human person should cultivate, plough and work the land, while to 'keep' would mean to care, protect, oversee and preserve the earth. It means "to take responsibility for"; to govern the world with justice. In other words, the human person endowed with intelligence must respect the laws of nature and the delicate equilibria existing between him/her and other created things (*Laudato Si*, no. 68). Pope Francis points out that the Church in her teaching did not state that other creatures are completely subordinated to the good of the human person as if they have no worth in themselves and can be treated as they wish. Every other creature too possesses its own particular goodness which must be respected by the human person (*Laudato Si*, no. 69).

The mandate "to serve and to preserve" the land places human beings not in a hierarchical position over creation but in a position of service to it. While all things have been subordinated to human beings, we should rule over them as God Himself does. This dominion does not grant to human beings the right to "lord over" creation in a manner inappropriate with God's own manner of governance. Human dominion does not present man as a despotic ruler. This portrayal puts human beings squarely in a caretaker position in regard to environmental stewardship. Thus, John Paul II points out that:

The dominion granted to man by the Creator is not an absolute power, nor can one speak of a freedom to "use and misuse," or to dispose of things as one pleases. The limitation imposed from the beginning by the Creator himself and expressed symbolically by the prohibition not to "eat of the fruit of the tree" (cf. Gen 2:16-17) shows clearly enough that, when it comes to the natural world, we are subject not only to biological laws but also to moral ones, which cannot be violated with impunity. A true concept of development cannot ignore the use of the elements of nature, the renewability of resources and the consequences of haphazard industrialization - three considerations which alert our consciences to the moral dimension of development (*Sollicitudo rei Socialis*, no. 34).

Consequently, the Christian understanding of dominion also shows the human beings as co-creators with God through the care of His creation. Dominion does

not mean that the natural world should be seen as resources to be exploited. It is rather, a reality to be respected and even revered as a gift from God. As a result, dominion requires responsible stewardship. The understanding of dominion as a humble submission to the will of God explains why John Paul II maintains that the relationship between humanity, nature and God could best be served through the concept of 'stewardship' (*Evangelium Vitae*, no. 22). Such stewardship must uphold the common good of humanity, while also respecting the end for which each creature was intended, and the means necessary to achieve that end. Disordered human actions, which harm creation, and by extension, human life and property directly threaten the right to life, to health, to development, to housing, to work, to culture and the rights of indigenous people (Chryssavgis, 2012). Therefore, irresponsible consumption, degradation and depletion of natural resources have a huge impact on human life.

The exact understanding of dominion helps to see creation as a gift and also promotes love in stewardship as against irresponsible use of nature. For John Paul II, this fundamental truth requires that natural resources be considered as gifts that have potentials to enrich human life and should be developed, not manipulated. Thus, dominion empowers human beings to acknowledge the truth about creation and to give thanks for the gift (*Redemptor Hominis*, no. 10). This is why dominion implies a vocation which consists in stewardship.

The command of dominion and domination, therefore, is an obligation to look after God's work responsibly on His behalf and to ensure through our participation in the well-being of creation. When the human person obeys the injunction to till and care for the earth, he/she reaps a bounty harvest from the earth; thereby, exhibiting the mutual responsibility in the relationship between the human person and nature. (Oso, 2017). The misunderstanding of dominion engenders ecological crisis that we experience today.

### **Ecological crisis**

Undoubtedly, the world today is immersed in the depth of ecological crisis and this has become a serious threat to human existence. Pope Francis (2015) describes this as "rapidification", that is, a continued acceleration of changes affecting humanity which are not directed towards common or integral and sustainable development. Human failure to be responsible stewards of earth has led to the current ecological crises threatening global climate stability, the ozone layer, and the diversity of plant and animal species. Ecological problems, such as, the pollution of air, the despoiling of land, depletion of natural resources, the degradation of fresh water, extinction of some species of plants and animals, and decline in the quality of human life and breakdown of society are challenges to human beings in today's world. The loss of forest and arable land in alarming proportions has tremendous implications for food security. It is instructive to point out that ecological disasters have the greatest impact on

the most vulnerable people – the Third World countries, the poor, the sick and the elderly. This goes against the plan of God who has created everything for the good of humanity.

John Paul II in his Encyclical letter *Centisimus Annus* points out that the threat to human life today lies precisely in the disordered use of creation by the modern society and sees the refusal of human beings to appreciate the place of God in carrying out the command of dominion as fundamental to this problem. He avers that, “At the root of the senseless destruction of the natural environment lies an anthropological error, which unfortunately is widespread in our day. People, who discover their capacity to transform and in a certain sense create the world through their own work, forget that this is always based on God's prior and original gift of the things that are” (no. 37). He points out that the ecological crisis that is experienced today can be described as human's unnatural treatment of nature and its sad result. Today, the impact upon the environment has so increased in force that it has changed in essence to the extent that the peace of the world is threatened because of lack of due respect for nature, by the plundering of natural resources and by progressive decline in the quality of life (John Paul II, 1990).

The words of Chivian (2008) are very appropriate to the situation of things in the present world which is ravaged by Coronavirus, snuffing life out of many when he writes, “Today, our world is being plagued and ravaged by so many illnesses. People are dying of some strange sicknesses that were not heard of before and that we do not know where they originate from. Cases of different forms of cancer are alarmingly on the increase. Many people have died and are still dying as a result of this and we ask God why” (p. 288). One can share the view of Oso (2017) that, the “why” of these strange diseases should rather be addressed to human beings because they are largely responsible for all the different forms of pollutions and other ecological catastrophe which are consequences of all the technological and scientific activities. Hence, the inordinate desire for riches, pleasures and esteem in the human person, leads easily to what the world suffers today. According to Agba (2016),

Humanity is indeed living in fear. Afraid that what it produces may radically turn against it to become the means and instrument for an unimaginable self-destruction. Rather than the comfort, satisfaction, happiness and security that we thought advancement in science and technology would bring, whatever has been achieved is now being overshadowed by the fear of the uncertainty of the reaction of the abused natural order (p. 143).

The ecological crisis challenging the world today can be attributed to the emerging problems and threat of consumerism. These not only alienate the

person but also damage the environment because humanity sees no other meaning in nature except the usefulness of its resources for their consumption. One can agree with the conclusion of John Paul II in *Centesimus Annus* that,

In his desire to have and to enjoy rather than to be and to grow, man consumes the resources of the earth and his own life in an excessive and disordered way. . . . Man, who discovers his capacity to transform and in a certain sense create the world through his own work, forgets that this is always based on God's prior and original gift of the things that are. Man thinks that he can make arbitrary use of the earth, subjecting it without restraint to his will, as though it did not have its own requisites and a prior God-given purpose, which man can indeed develop but must not betray. Instead of carrying out his role as a co-operator 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 tyrannised than governed by him (no. 37).

### **Human beings as stewards of creation**

The environmental stewardship of the human person can be seen in his/her relationship with the whole of creation. The human person is grounded in three relationships: God, neighbour and the earth. This shows that everything is interrelated – there is a relationship between the human person and his environment, between the human persons and God Himself. Human beings' image the triune God by living in authentic communion not only with other human beings but also with all of creation (Kusumulayam, 2008). This is a reflection of Trinitarian theology. God wills communion with all creation and He desires the divine life to be human life. As a theology of communion and relationship, Trinitarian theology is about God's life for all creation and our life with God, others and the earth.

Discussing human relatedness to the whole of creation, LaCugna (1993) describes the human person as 'Catholic'. This implies that, by being created by a God who wills the goodness of the whole of creation, the human person is to be open to all that exists in the universe. The human person is thus, not a being isolated from the rest of creation (Lossky, 1973). Hefner (1994) brings out well the relationship between the human person and creation when he stresses that, "nature is the reality system in which we have emerged and in which we now live, including its past history and its future, what is visible and known to us, as well as what is unknown now and what may well be forever unknowable" (p. 508). This shows that human beings, as the image of God should have a dynamic relationship not only with other human persons, but with whatever has been created by God. Wilkinson (1991) argues that the relationship of the human person to the created universe can be traced to the etymology of the words used in the creation accounts in Genesis when he notes that, "the Hebrew

word used in Genesis 1 and 2 for 'earth' is *adamah*, and the Hebrew word for 'man' is *Adam*. What the words and the whole account suggest then is that... whatever else we are, humans are also earth; we share our nature with its soil, its plants, its animals. Hence we are responsible to all" (p. 284).

The human person stands in relation to everything: the material, living and non-living world. According to Selling (1998), this can be said to constitute the core meaning of personhood. Such a relationship has also consequences for the world, because "a lack of sensitivity to the human person's relation to the material world can result either in the failure to reap the benefits of the world in which we live (use of resources) or in the neglect of the care that must be taken in our relation to the environment (pollution)" (p. 98). Of course, the relationship of the human person to the whole of creation calls for a relationship of responsibility. The fact of our being created in the image of God and the fact of our relatedness to God, both direct us towards a committed engagement for the welfare of God's creation (Kusumulayam, 2008).

John Paul II in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* recalls the affinity existing between human beings and other creatures which is based on God's plan for creation and the necessity of human beings to seek the will of God in carrying out the mandate of dominion:

Thus man comes to have a certain affinity with other creatures: he is called to use them, and to be involved with them. As the Genesis account says...he is placed in the garden with the duty of cultivating and watching over it, being superior to the other creatures placed by God under his dominion.... But at the same time man must remain subject to the will of God, who imposes limits upon his use and dominion over things (no. 53).

As a result, the social nature of the human person is an indication that there is independence between personal betterment and the improvement of the society, and this social nature goes beyond the human person in society to the human and his natural habitat, the earth. Consequently, there exists another level of interdependence between the human person and his environment. The human person depends on his/her environment for survival, for nourishment, for the air he/she breathes and for the water he/she drinks. The human person has an obligation which consists of what Oso (2017) refers to as "three Ps" towards the earth: to Protect it, to Preserve it and to Promote it. Consequently, human beings have the obligation to invest the talents that God has entrusted to them for the protection, preservation and promotion of the created world.

Additionally, it is good to point out here that respecting the environment does not mean considering material or animal nature more important than human

beings. Indeed, in the history of salvation, the human person and the natural world are never ascribed the same dignity. In the Sermon on the Mount, the Lord himself, while counselling his disciples not to be anxious about their subsistence but to trust in God's providence, assures them that God even takes care of the birds of the air, and adds, "Are you not of much greater value than they are?" (Matt. 6:26). The Scriptures frankly present an ordered hierarchy of being: God rules over all, and human beings serve as his stewards, exercising an instrumental dominion over everything, while also being accountable to Him for the exalted position as the rulers of the earth. This accountability means not selfishly considering nature to be at the complete disposal by the human person at will, for future generations also have the right to reap its benefits and to exhibit towards nature the same responsible freedom that they claim for themselves.

### **Responsible stewardship: the ethical relevance**

The ethical relevance of the concept of stewardship is evident in what Schweiker (1999) describes as "Responsibility Ethics" which is the ethical basis for rights and duties. This implies that the rights the human person has to the created world is accompanied with the duty to care for the earth. According to Schweiker (1999), the imperative of responsibility ethics is that, "In all action and relations, we are to respect and enhance the integrity of life. The power to act should always be at the service of all. Hence, an ethics of responsibility is about the evaluation and direction of power" (p. 25). Stewardship, then, is both right and duty.

According to Ojo (2014), the right and duty of the human person toward the created world flow from his/her dignity as the image of God. This is also clear in Vallianatos (1997) that, "by virtue of being created, (humanity) bears a responsibility; human dignity and responsibility are inseparable" (p. 195). Given the capacities and creativity of the human person, he/she is called not simply to 'manage' the affairs of the household, but to the dignified task of being 'co-creator' with God in creation. He continues that:

Human beings are God's created co-creators whose purpose is to be the agency, acting in freedom, to birth the future that is most wholesome for the nature that has birthed us – the nature that is not only our own genetic heritage, but also the entire human community and the evolutionary and ecological reality in which and to which we belong. Exercising this agency is said to be God's will for humans (Vallianatos, 1997, p. 97).

As the co-creator of the world with God, the human person has a decisive role to play in the 'shaping', 'reshaping' and 'transforming' the world that is entrusted to his or her creative freedom. The creative freedom of the created co-creator is

the means by which the whole of creation is enabled to participate in the intentional fulfilment of God's purpose for His creation.

Being the co-creator with God, acting as the image of God, is not to be completely 'autonomous' to do what one wills, but to be really the *imago Dei*; that is, we are called to be stewards of God for the earth in terms of relatedness to Him. Hefner (1998) brings this idea out clearly that,

The dignity of human beings is especially evident in their *partnership* with God in caring for creation. As tenders of the garden and stewards of creation, human beings are not mere underlings with a task to perform. If they are superior to the other creatures, it is because through them the creative, divine Spirit is present and active in a unique way.... Human beings are *from* God and the earth as well as *with* God *for* the earth (p. 32).

As the human person is achieving more and more power through the advancement of technology, his/her responsibility is becoming higher. McDonagh (1997) therefore, puts it succinctly that,

The responsibility is not something that can be taken lightly because, ultimately, the call to stewardship is a privilege bestowed on humankind by God. As with all privileges, human beings will be held accountable for their stewardship. If they are caring and cultivate harmony in all their dealings with each other and the Earth, then they grow in the image and likeness of God (p. 123).

It is an enormous responsibility placed on human beings, because they are endowed with a unique transcendent capacity for relating to all creatures in the world even to those in the ages to come.

Therefore, human stewardship is a responsibility that requires accountability because it is an exercise of 'dominion' qualified by the recognition that there is a higher 'dominion' or sovereignty of God. Only a responsibility combined with accountability would help us not to fall into the trap that Selling (2010) warns of, "the trap of thinking that the material world constitutes an arbitrary object for our unrestrained manipulation" (p. 101). Further still, Schotsmans (2003) points out that the idea of environmental stewardship is not that of merely maintaining and conserving what we are entrusted with, but is a 'creative stewardship' in the sense of 'taking care' of that which we are entrusted with, creatively with proper responsibility and accountability. Thus, the human persons, are to use all the resources available in a responsible manner and to continue the act of 'creation' being accountable to God who granted them the stewardship.

The human person as the responsible and accountable steward of God's creation shows they are 'servants' of creation. The concept of a servant shifts the orientation of human action away from themselves to the well-being of others, making room for others to be, and finally giving all the credit to the praise of the master (Wirzba, 2007). As the steward of creation, this is exactly what is expected of the human persons – to work for common good, the well-being of others and everything on the earth as co-creators with God, fulfilling His plan for creation (Kusumlayam, 2008). Hence, the common good is one dimension of ecological relevance within Catholic Social Teaching (CST) which recognises the interplay between the responsibility of every being in the promotion and preservation of the created earth. In view of this, Pope Francis avers in *Evangelii Gaudium*: “We human beings are not only the beneficiaries but also the stewards of other creatures” (215). *Gaudium et Spes* identifies common good as “the sum total of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfilment... and consequently involves rights and duties with respect to the whole human race” (p. 26). This balance ensures that individuals do not become a cogwheel, and it also builds a well-ordered society which supports cooperation in many dimensions of political, domestic, economic, and recreational life (Richie, 2015). As such, it is the responsibility of people of good will to maintain the integrity of the ecosystem for all. CST articulates a notion of common good that is concerned with the building of a more just society around two basic values: the dignity of the human person and the well-being of society. The common good includes fair use of the natural world for all people. This is what CST refers to as Universal Destination of Earthly Goods which means that: “God intended the earth and everything in it for the use of all human beings and peoples. Thus, under the leadership of justice and in the company of charity, created goods should flow fairly to all” (*Populorum Progressio*, no. 22).

Pope Francis in *Laudato Si* suggests a broader interpretation of the word “common good” by linking it to intergenerational solidarity when he writes:

The notion of common good also extends to future generations. The global economic crises have made painfully obvious the detrimental effects of disregarding our common destiny, which cannot exclude those who come after us. We can no longer speak of sustainable development apart from intergenerational solidarity. Once we start to think about the kind of world we are leaving to future generations, we look at things differently; we realise that the world is a gift which we have freely received and must share with others. 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 (no. 159).

This implies that the world community needs to remember that the material world is a gift, which should be cherished and preserved for the future generations. This is because this gift is not only for the present generation but also for generations to come (Alva, 2015). Hence, the rights that the human person has to the goods of the earth is closely accompanied with the responsibility to care for the earth, so that the future generations will also be able to exercise their rights and responsibility. Human duties towards the environment are linked to their duties towards the human person, considered in himself/herself and in relation to others. In essence, human beings are called to cooperate with God as responsible stewards in respecting and caring for creation rather than exploiting it. In other words, mistreating creation diminishes human dignity, violates nature, and endangers our future.

### **Conclusion**

The Church's engagement with environmental issues derives from its belief that Christians have a responsibility to work for the well-being of all humanity, to recognise environmental stewardship as their Christian responsibility. Human being is a being with dignity and rights, having being created by God in His own image and likeness. The rights of the human person come with a responsibility. As the human person has his/her many rights, with other creatures at his/her service, so also has he/she the responsibility to care for them. Consequently, the care of the earth is the responsibility of the human person if he/she must enjoy the benefits of his/her dominance over other creatures. The fact that creation was entrusted to human dominion does not mean that the natural world should be seen as resources to be exploited. It is rather a reality to be respected and even revered as a gift and trust from God. Human beings as stewards of creation are, therefore, called to enhance the divine purpose for creation and at the same time authentically develop themselves. They have the obligation to invest the talents that God has entrusted to them for the development of the created world. In this way, through responsible stewardship, humanity acts as a bridge of mutual love between God the Creator and His creation. As *imago Dei*, they are viceroys of a God who found everything 'very good' at the end of Creation. Thus, the human persons are commissioned to keep the Creation as 'very good'.

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