

# Human Dimension of the Ecological Crisis in Nigeria: The Imperatives of *CARITAS IN VERITATE*

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## Abstract

This article titled "Human Dimension of the Ecological Crisis in Nigeria: The Imperatives of *Caritas in Veritate*" investigates the issues of human ecology in Nigeria based on the Church's teachings on the sanctity of human life and the dignity of the human person. It bemoans the attacks on the human person as witnessed in recent happenings across Nigeria. This is evident in such affronts on human beings like murder, kidnapping and other societal ills like hunger, poverty and corruption. These unfortunate occurrences provoke the need to evaluate people's awareness of the implications of the doctrine of *imago Dei*. The study is aimed at engendering an ecological worldview with the human person at its center and thus provoking a profound respect for the dignity of the human person, by promoting a deep catechesis of human ecology. As a panacea, the article makes recommendations towards the promotion of human ecology in order to forestall the violation of the human person whose dignity is inalienable because it stems from his being created *imago Dei*.

**Keywords:** ecology, human ecology, human dignity, *Caritas in Veritate*.

## 1. Introduction

On Thursday 13th May, 2022, Nigerians were met with the shocking news of the gruesome murder of Deborah Samuel, a 200 level Economics student of the Shehu Shagari College of Education, Sokoto by Islamic fundamentalists on allegations of blasphemy. She was allegedly stoned to death and her body set ablaze by the irate mob. The most heart-rending part of this unfortunate incident was that her killers proudly bragged about their exploits in full view of the cameras (The Tribune, 14.05.2022). While the country was yet to come to terms with this unfortunate incident, on Pentecost Sunday, 5th June, 2022, gun men laid siege to St Francis Catholic Church, Owo, Ondo State, shooting sporadically and killing scores of worshippers including women and children. It is reports such as these inhuman acts of violence that make it pertinent to redirect the world towards the problem of human ecology. Human ecology ask

such questions as: how, when and why did we become so inhuman in our treatment with one another?; how did we regress so backwardly in the love and respect of our fellow human beings, despite the enlightenment and education of our modern era?; what gives human beings the moral justification to take the life of another under whatever pretext? These questions make us ask if at all we know the implications of men and women being created in the image and likeness of God, as preached by such major religions of the world as Christianity and Islam.

Problems of ecology form major themes at national and international gatherings today. This is because it has become very evident that the world is facing grave ecological crises. While most ecological discourses focus on environmental issues, one consistently distressing aspect of the ecological debate is the issue of human ecology. The concern for the ecosystem should not center on environmental protection and forget the dignity of the human person, nor should it do the opposite. Rather, it should acknowledge what our society so often forgets - that there is a unified world, created by God, over whom the human person is a steward. Therefore, this work will explore the Church's teachings on human ecology, with a major focus on *Caritas in Veritate*, with a view to exposing these problems and making recommendations towards promoting a deep respect for the human person as a panacea for the problems of human ecology.

## 2. What is Human Ecology?

The word 'ecology' is derived from the ancient Greek *οἶκος* (*oikos*) which means house, household, family or dwelling place, and also the Greek *λογία* (*logia*) which means word, language, reason or study of. According to the Wikipedia, the term *Oecologie* was coined by the German zoologist Ernst Haeckel in 1866 (04.01.18). Today, the word is used to refer to the study of the environment and the environmental challenges facing the world today. Human ecology, on the other hand, is defined by the Merriam Webster Dictionary as "a branch of sociology dealing especially with the spatial and temporal interrelationships between humans and their economic, social, and political organization" (20.02.18). According to Gerald Marten, human ecology is about relationships between people and their environment. In human ecology the environment is perceived as an ecosystem. An ecosystem is everything in a specified area - the air, soil, water, living organisms and physical structures, including everything built by humans. The living parts of an ecosystem - microorganisms, plants and animals (including humans) - are its biological community (Marten, 2001). In our study on human ecology, we see humans as inhabitants of the Earth as an ecosystem.

Theologically, human Ecology is an attitude emphasized by both Pope Benedict and Pope Francis that focuses on the connection between the human person, our environment and our neighbor. Catholics, Christians and people in general are encouraged to think of human ecology in terms of dependence and interdependence. The first problem of human ecology is, therefore, a lack of awareness of the interconnectivity and interdependence of human ecology and environmental ecology. We must acknowledge our dependence on God and on reality, with all of its natural limitations and also recognize the interdependence of creation: humanity's dependence on nature; man's dependence on his fellow man; and nature's dependence on our "care for our common home".

The second problem of human ecology is an absence of love and respect for the sanctity of life and dignity of the human person. Some major problems identified with human ecology are problems of poverty, hunger and starvation, unemployment, exploitation, human trafficking, human slavery, lack of basic amenities, gender based violence, child abuse and all ills which threaten the dignity and sanctity of human life such as abortion, sterilization, kidnappings, terrorism and murder. There is also what Pope Francis refers to as 'neo-extractivism', that is, great business interests that want to lay hands on the natural resources of a people without taking into consideration the people that inhabit that environment (Francis, 2018). At the heart of all these evils are greed, corruption and an unhealthy disregard for the dignity of the human person which stems from his being created in the image and likeness of God.

### **3. Theological Framework: The Doctrine of *Imago Dei***

Let us note here that the Biblical verses of Genesis 1:26-27 constitute the *locus classicus* of the doctrine of the *imago Dei*, the notion that human beings were made in the image and likeness of God. According to Richard Middleton, although the Christian tradition has typically treated these verses as containing a central biblical affirmation with significant implications for human life, the entire Old Testament contains only three explicit references to the *Imago Dei*: Genesis 1:26-27; 5:1 and 9:6 (2005:16). While in the New Testament, only two texts speak of the creation of human beings in God's image: 1 Corinthians 11:7 and James 3:9. Going further, he turns to extra-biblical paradigms for explanations of the doctrine of *imago Dei*. According to him,

Although this may be something of an exaggeration, it is not much of one, for the vast majority of interpreters right up to recent times have understood the meaning of the image in terms of a metaphysical analogy or similarity between the human soul and the being of God, in categories not likely to have occurred to the author of Genesis (18).

Another possible explanation to the meaning of image, according to him, is that pointed out by David Cairns who says “in all Christian writers up to Aquinas we find the image of God conceived as man's power of reason” (Middleton, 2001:19). However, in the Greek East, the substantialistic image was often understood dynamically, as the progressive conformity of the soul to God or the salvific partaking of the divine nature, a process typically called 'divinization' (19-20).

In his attempt to explain St Augustine's position on the doctrine of *imago Dei*, Dominic Robinson states that humanity itself is not in fact the “*imago*”, the image of God as though we reflect God in a mirror. Rather humanity is placed in a special relationship with God. This basic relationship, according to him, marks off humanity from all other creatures. Going on he states as follows:

This basic truth, however, allows us to say that each individual human being has a “likeness” (*similitudo*) to God. Each individual human person has a special dignity proper to himself which constitutes his own particular relationship with God and his fellows. It presents to each and every one the possibility of living, knowing and being in a way which begins to find beyond himself the God according to whose image one has been created. Thus, at the very heart of Augustine's thought, we have the basic notion that humanity is made with a special dignity which is generic yet also deeply personal to each individual (2011:9).

This doctrine of the *imago Dei* is the foundation of the Church's teaching on human dignity as expressed in the words of John Behr “Now what from a Christian perspective marks out the dignity of human beings is that, unlike the rest of creation (and even the angels), they alone are created in the image and likeness of God” (2013:16). That is why every act committed against the human person is regarded with serious consequences. Thus in the words of Pinker “Even when breaches of dignity lead to an identifiable harm, it's ultimately autonomy and respect for persons that gives us grounds for condemning it” (Howard, 2013:16).

For John Kilner in his work *Dignity and Destiny: Humanity in the Image of God*, being created in the image of God is not a matter of human attributes, which people have to varying degrees, but about ways that people are like God (2015:151). Also, likenesses to God in the Bible are not on a basis of human significance in the way that people's status as being in the likeness-image of God is. This is because:

Viewing attributes (likeness to God) as the basis for human worth opens the door to reductionism – focusing only on those characteristics of people that one thinks are most important. Such an outlook in turn can

all too easily lead to devaluing those who do not manifest those characteristics sufficiently. From that logically (though perhaps unconsciously) flows the demeaning and oppression of particular groups of people (152).

The tragedy that this kind of logic can foster has been revealed time and time again by historical antecedents. Writing on *Human Dignity: Philosophical Origin and Scientific Erosion of an Idea*, Kurt Bayertz in, points out that in ancient times, the concept of dignity usually referred to respect for individuals with a high social status: a Greek king or a Roman senator, for example. It was the Stoics who first developed the idea of a dignity attributable to the human being *per se*, that is, independently of individual characteristics (1996:73). “Christianity picked up on the second meaning and interpreted the dignity of all human beings theologically: the latter's origins may be attributed to the special position which the human being assumes within creation as *imago Dei*. Human dignity is viewed here as reflecting the dignity of God” (73).

The doctrine of *Imago Dei* is the foundation of the Church's teachings on the dignity of the human person (cf. CCC 1700). Humankind is the crown and epicenter of creation and the only creatures capable of responding to God's act of self-communication. Only the human person is capable of knowing and loving God (cf. *Gaudium et Spes* 12). This sets them apart from every other creature. From this we derive that human beings have a special dignity attached to them by virtue of their humanness and not any individual quality or characteristic of theirs. This forms the basis for all legislations in defense of the human person. The sanctity of human life and the dignity of the human person are the goals of human ecology. Any society that does not promote these two virtues does so at its own risk. This is because they form the basis on which the survival of the human society is built. It is therefore incumbent on every society to uphold respect for life and dignity of persons through a proper enlightenment of its citizens and through legislation when necessary. The Universal Declaration of Human as its first item: “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood” (Behr, 17).

#### **4. Humanity as the Center of Creation and Focus of Ecology**

Michael Schmaus, in his work *Dogma 2: God and Creation*, describes man's position in creation in these words:

In virtue of his origin man exists in an indissoluble relationship with the rest of creation... At the same time however, there is between man and the rest of creation a fundamental and irreducible distance. Scripture

sees the relationship in the fact that man comes from the earth. It sees the distinction in the fact that man is the climax of creation. Scripture expresses this by calling man the image of God and by giving him a special commission from God to be master of the earth (1969:110-111).

Schmaus says Scripture sees the relationship in the fact that man comes from the earth, is allied to the earth and will return once again into the earth. It sees the distinction in the fact that man is the climax of creation. Scripture expresses this by calling man the image of God and by giving him a special commission from God to be master of the earth (111). He captures this succinctly when he says "Man is that creature who in kinship with Jesus is sought by God as a conversation partner, and who has become and becomes capable of dialogue with God. The rest of creation enters into dialogue with God through man" (112).

In the foreword on his work "Human Ecology: A Physician's Advice for Human Life", Robert Jackson, a distinguished physician, observes that:

Environmentalists and ecologists are becoming more aware that actions affecting one aspect of nature frequently have effects far more widespread than had previously been suspected... the recent interest in ecology has centered primarily on the subhuman world of air, water, plants and animals. Too little attention has been directed to human ecology (1990:x).

However, all ecological conversations must and should have man as the epicenter. Nature was created for man and should be explored for the good of man. Thus, the ultimate good of man must be the goal of ecology.

## **5. African Culture and Human Ecology**

The love for their fellow human beings which African cultures were renowned for is an example for all Christians. One beautiful example of how African cultures take the human person is in the Igbo name for human being, "*Mmadu*", which is made up of two words "*mma*" meaning "beauty" and "*ndu*" meaning "life". Thus, the word for human being in Igbo - "*mmadu*" means "the beauty of life". While it was unfortunate that the early missionaries dismissed everything in African tradition as mere fetishism, it is not too late for African Christians to revisit those human values that made the African society replete with brotherly love and service and inculcate them into their daily lives. While, on the one hand we should avoid syncretism, the tendency to combine two or more religious beliefs, on the other hand, we should not throw away the baby with the bath water. We need to revisit, rediscover, and even celebrate those human and social values that were good in our culture. We must learn to celebrate the beauty of human life and respect the inalienable dignity of every individual,

irrespective of race, tribe, sex or social status. There must be a sense of collective responsibility towards others. The suffering of others has a direct effect on us and on the earth as a whole. That is the fundamental message of human ecology which we must emphasize.

## **6. Challenges to Human Ecology in Nigeria**

There are different challenges to human ecology such as: hunger and poverty, slavery and forced labour, murder, terrorism and kidnapping. Others include: abortion, euthanasia and suicide, artificial birth control methods, same sex unions, trans-sexuality, and natural disasters. Corruption also constitutes another major barrier to human ecology. We shall discuss a few of these challenges because of their impact on the Nigerian society.

a. **Hunger and Poverty:** Anup Shah, discussing global hunger and poverty says poverty is the state for the majority of the world's people and nations. Shah poses the following questions: Why is this? Is it enough to blame poor people for their own predicament? Have they been lazy, made poor decisions, and been solely responsible for their plight? What about their governments? Have they pursued policies that actually harm successful development? He says such causes of poverty and inequality are no doubt real. But deeper and more global causes of poverty are often less discussed. However, meaningful long-term alleviation to hunger is rooted in the alleviation of poverty, as poverty leads to hunger. World hunger is a terrible symptom of world poverty. In 2018, Nigeria overtook India as the poverty capital of the world, with over 87 million people living in extreme poverty (The Vanguard, 10.04.2022). While in 2022 India reclaimed its position as the poverty capital of the world, Nigeria still maintains second place with over 70 million people living in abject poverty (The Cable, 09.04.2022). Given that hunger and poverty are two faces of the same coin, one can imagine the number of people living in extreme hunger in Nigeria. Hunger cannot be solved without the alleviation of poverty.

b. **Terrorism/Banditry:** Poverty is a calculated and deliberate use of violence against civilians as well as armed personnel within the state. Terrorism poses a serious problem to law and order and leads to the disintegration of society. The use of murder, torture, mutilation, arson, kidnapping, rape and extortion create an atmosphere of suspicion, fear and panic all around. Currently, Nigeria occupies the sixth position in the Global Terrorism Index (GTI), having dropped from fourth position which it occupied since 2017 (Channels Tv, 04.04.2022). The activities of the dreaded *Boko Haram* sect as well as bandits, mainly in the northern part of the country, have affected the daily and economic life of the nation. This is because agricultural activities have been greatly stalled due to the harassment of farmers by armed bandits. The nation is yet to recover from the shock of the Abuja-Kaduna train attack on 28th March, 2022, which

claimed many lives and many of those abducted in that attack by these murderous bandits are yet to regain freedom. It is obvious that terrorism has been difficult to curb in the country because some people benefit from it and the government is clueless on the solution to this menace.

c. Kidnapping: Mike Uzochukwu defines kidnapping as abducting and holding anybody captive, typically to obtain a ransom (13.02.2018). Sometimes kidnappers hold their captives longer in order to demand more from the relatives of the victim. Kidnapping is not new in Nigeria and is one of the country's big challenges. Facts and figures show that the kidnapping frequency in the country is high. Some major causes of kidnapping include unemployment, poverty, illiteracy, religion, greed, politics and corruption. Kidnappers often torture their victims in order to force money out of their relatives or associates. Some victims are even raped or killed. There is the recent case of Fr. Joseph Akete Bako, a priest of the Catholic Archdiocese of Kaduna, Nigeria who was kidnapped on the 8th of March, 2022 and died after eight weeks in captivity. His burial on the 7th of June, 2022 was quite heartbreaking because his remains were never recovered. Alexander Ekemenah describes the effects of kidnapping as devastating as well as far-reaching psychological trauma for the victims and their families, the society and the State – in their constituent units (13.02.2018).

d. Mass Murder: Another very unfortunate development has been the wave of reckless and unwanted destruction of human lives by gunmen across the country. Some of these atrocities are attributed to Fulani herdsmen especially in the northern part of Nigeria like Benue, Plateau, Kaduna, Kogi, and Enugu. In the eastern part of the country, they are often attribute to unknown gunmen. Whatever they are called, for many years, these murderous brigands have wreaked mayhem across the country and the government seems to be completely powerless in its duty to end their bloody carnage. at a loss of ideas on how to check their vicious activities. In December 2021, security agents confirmed the death of 38 people at the hands of gunmen in Giwa Local Area of Kaduna State (Vanguard, 19.12.2021). In more attacks on 24th and 25th March, 2022, gunmen killed no fewer than 50 people in 9 villages in Giwa Local Government Area, kidnapping scores of people and burning houses and vehicles (The Tribune, 26.04.2022). The result of these heinous crimes is that the average Nigerian lives perpetual fear and anxiety.

e. Corruption: Corruption is one of the major challenges to human ecology in Nigeria. Most others problems: hunger, sickness, kidnapping, murder, accidents and others are directly or indirectly linked to corruption. The major cases of corruption in Nigeria are widely associated with poor public finance management. On a regular basis, the media is inundated with allegations of high profile cases of corruption involving public office holders. For Victor

Usifo, corruption is a deep rooted problem which has taken its toll on the government, people, infrastructure, business and life of the average Nigerian. He mentions causes of corruption as greed, poverty, and lack of moral values, economic insecurity, un-patriotism, and strange wish to acquire material wealth (2017). He mentions some effects of corruption to include failure to provide and maintain infrastructures, weak control in tax collection, wasteful government spending, high crime and prostitution rate due to unemployment, and lack of moral value in the society, poor image of the country, dishonesty, low foreign direct investment, and poverty leading to inability to get good education and health care by many people, to mention but a few. It is also a major cause of insecurity in the country as money budgeted for security is apparently diverted to private pockets.

## **7. Textual Analysis of *Caritas in Veritate***

Having set a theological foundation for our discourse and seen some of the challenges to human ecology in Nigeria, let us now examine the document *Caritas in Veritate* which forms the ethical scope of this article.

### **7.1 Brief Summary of *Caritas in Veritate***

*Caritas in Veritate* (English: "Charity in Truth") is the third and last encyclical of Pope Benedict XVI, and his only social encyclical "on integral human development in charity and truth", signed on 29 June, 2009. It is addressed to the entire Catholic faithful and to all strata of global society – there are specific points aimed at political leaders, business leaders, religious leaders, financiers, and aid agencies and to all people of good will. The Holy Father began his encyclical in these words: "Charity in truth, to which Jesus Christ bore witness..., is the principal driving force behind the authentic development of every person and of all humanity"(1), and ends by calling for "love and forgiveness, self-denial, acceptance of others, justice and peace" (78-79).

### **7.2 The Imperatives of *Caritas in Veritate***

For a firm grasp of is the Holy Father's message in *Caritas in Veritate*, let us anchor our discussion on article 51 which states:

The Church has a responsibility towards creation and she must assert this responsibility in the public sphere. In so doing, she must defend not only earth, water and air as gifts of creation that belong to everyone. She must above all protect mankind from self-destruction. There is need for what might be called a human ecology, correctly understood. The deterioration of nature is in fact closely connected to the culture that shapes human coexistence: when "human ecology" is respected within society, environmental ecology also benefits. 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.

In *Caritas in Veritate* 51, the Pope calls for a new ecology focused on the human person. For this to be achieved, it is important to develop a proper theology of human ecology. This document contains a lot of theological riches: The very first sentence of the encyclical insists that the social question is addressed from a distinctively theological methodology. "Charity in truth, to which Jesus Christ bore witness by his earthly life and especially by his death and resurrection, is the principal driving force behind the development of every person and all humanity" (1). The search for love and truth is purified and liberated by Jesus Christ from the impoverishment our humanity brings to it. "Caritas in Veritate is the principle around which the Church's social doctrine turns" (6). The theological corollary to this is that the human alone cannot bring about true integral human development in the world. "Development requires a transcendent vision of the person, it needs God: without him, development is either denied or entrusted exclusively to humans, who fall into the trap of thinking he can bring about his own salvation, and ends up promoting a dehumanized form of development" (11).

*Caritas in Veritate*, like other social encyclicals before it, emphasizes the dignity of the person as the fundamental and most important human value. The encyclical refers to the dignity of the human person or human dignity over ten times. Pope Benedict XVI uses different expressions to accentuate the basic importance of human dignity, such as: "the inviolable dignity of the human person" (45); "the person's transcendent dignity" (53); "the essential dignity of every man and woman" (63). In line with Catholic theological tradition, the basis for this dignity is the fact that all human beings are created in the image of God. The Church's social doctrine "is based on the person's creation in the 'image of God' (Gen. 1: 27)" (45). "God is the guarantor of the person's true development, inasmuch as, having created human beings in his image. He also establishes the transcendent dignity of men and women" (29).

From a theological viewpoint, the Christian person is seen in the light of the gift of creation and redemption. God's love and grace have come to us in Jesus and have been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit. We who have received God's love are called also to share that same love with others. "As the objects of God's love, men and women become subjects of charity; they are called to make themselves instruments of grace, so as to pour forth God's charity and to weave networks of charity" (5). Thus,

Charity in truth places the human being before the astonishing experience of gift. Gratuitousness is present in our lives in many different forms which often go unrecognized because of a consumerist

and utilitarian view of life. The human being is made for gift, which expresses and makes present the transcendent dimension of the human (34).

Benedict is quick to add, however, that charity in truth is a gift received by everyone (34). Catholic theology has always insisted on the gift of God's love, but the emphasis on gift and gratuitousness constitutes a new contribution that Benedict has made to Catholic social teaching. "Economic, social and political development, if it is to be authentically human, needs to make room for the principle of gratuitousness as an expression of fraternity" (34).

The focus of *Caritas in Veritate* is integral and authentic human development and the encyclical discusses the human person primarily in terms of this integral development. Quoting substantially from Paul VI's *Populorum Progressio*, Benedict views development as a vocation. Every person is called upon to develop and fulfill himself, for every life is a vocation. To regard development as a vocation is to realize that it derives from a transcendental call but is incapable on its own of supplying the ultimate meaning. Integral human development must be open to the Absolute, which gives life its true meaning. The Gospel is fundamental for this development (18). In line with Catholic theological tradition, *Caritas in Veritate* points out that on the natural plane (as distinguished from the supernatural), integral human development is a response to a vocation from God the Creator. But the encyclical also recognizes the problems involved on the merely human or natural plane. "When God is eclipsed, our ability to recognize the natural order, purpose, and the 'good' begins to wane" (18). *Caritas in Veritate* thus has to live with the tension of the vocation of all persons to development, but without the grace of Christ, the human does not and cannot achieve the fullness of development.

## 8. Recommendations

Against this backdrop of *Caritas in Veritate*, the following recommendations are made:

a. Ecology based Catechesis with the Human Person as the Focus: The defense of the sanctity of life and dignity of the human person is the duty of all Christians and training individuals for this purpose should be a major objective of our catechetical formation. Therefore bishops, priests, deacons, catechists and all those responsible for the catechetical formation of the faithful should conscientiously instill values that stimulate the value of the human person in the faithful.

b. Human Ecology based Sermons: In the liturgy, the homily serves to express the Word of God in the linguistic categories of the people's worldview. This

medium is very important for the ecological enlightenment of the faithful. While the concept of human ecology could be somewhat vague and abstract, Catholic homiletics should develop methodologies of breaking down the concept of human ecology in imagery familiar to the faithful. Homilists should make a deliberate attempt to provoke the consciousness of the challenges to human ecology in the society and awaken the faithful towards their obligations in promoting human ecology. While the relationship between God and human beings is the focus of homiletics, homilists must promote a relationship that interweaves practical love between human beings. Human solidarity should be a major objective of our kerygma. The homily is one very resourceful way of promoting a strong sense of the interconnectedness of all human beings.

c. **Parish and Diocesan Human-Oriented Projects:** Dioceses and parishes should undertake projects that reach out to the suffering. These can come in the form of addressing the needs of those who suffer by feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, giving shelter to the homeless and employing the jobless. Special care should also be given to the sick especially those who cannot afford medication. Projects such as these are not capital intensive. All they entail is the readiness of the faithful to share the little they have with those in need. Rehabilitating the destitute can be made a parish project and the dioceses can assist when necessary. Parishes and dioceses should also set up investments that create job opportunities for the faithful in order to reduce poverty.

d. **Discouraging Wastefulness:** One way to reach out to the suffering is by discouraging a culture of wastefulness. There is a great imbalance between members of the human society. This is made worse by the propensity of some people to be wasteful. A lot of people are impoverished because of the wastefulness of others and so wastefulness should be discouraged as much as possible. The Church must lead the way in providing an alternative to an attitude of wastefulness by undertaking projects that help to create a balance between those who have too much and those who have too little. This will help to reduce a culture of wastefulness and decrease the wide gap between the rich and the poor in the country. The early life of the disciples as seen in the Acts of the Apostles should serve as a paradigm for this.

e. **Developing a Pro-Life Culture:** There is a critical need to foster a pro-life culture among the faithful. The attitude of nonchalance or indifference towards human suffering must be discouraged. We must teach people the universal effect of human suffering. Injustice done to one is injustice done to all.

f. **Cultural and Ecumenical Collaboration:** The Church in Nigeria should identify those traditional human values and practices that do not contravene the gospel message and find a way to integrate them into the Church's life. Paramount among such values is the deep respect and love for human life and

dignity. It is also incumbent on the Church to seek ways of fostering collaboration with other ecclesial communities and religions towards the defense of human life and dignity.

g. Role of Government: The Church must serve as a gadfly to constantly remind the government of its primary duty to protect the lives and properties of the people. This is the prophetic role of the Church and she must carry it out to the latter. No matter how trying the times may be, the Church's prophetic voice must never go silent. Liberation theology is a fundamental part of the Church's teachings. She must be that voice of the voiceless crying out against all forms of societal ills.

## 9. Conclusion

The Church has always been concerned about human ecology. In his *Centesimus Annus* of 1991, Pope John Paul II states

The ecology of nature and human ecology are deeply intertwined. Not only does injustice and abuse in one affect the other, but the response of humankind very closely decides the fate of the creation we so much love and care for. Along with care for the natural environment, we also have to care for a human ecology that provides the space for the dignity and fulfillment of the human person and the good life for all according to God's plan (37).

It is this idea that has been behind all the social encyclicals from Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* of 1891 till Pope Francis' *Amoris Laetitia* of 2016. This shows that the Church cannot adequately respond to the ecological concerns of our times without addressing, first and foremost, the issue of the dignity of the human person, without whom the entire idea of environmental protection will rest on shaky foundations. It is issues such as these that this work seeks to address for, according to Benedict XVI's *Caritas in Veritate* 51, "when human ecology is respected within society, environmental ecology also benefits".

This work reverberates the call of *Caritas in Veritate* 51 for a human ecology aimed at protecting mankind from self-destruction. The unhealthy attitude of self-aggrandizement at the expense of every other person is the root of most problems of human ecology. This has led to an unhealthy culture of greed, avarice and corruption. This causes poverty and suffering for those who do not belong to the privileged class. A strong sense of responsibility to all people irrespective of our perceived differences must be engraved on the hearts of all. As the Holy Father pointed out, "...human virtues are interrelated such that the weakening of one places others at risk..." (51). It means it must be all hands-on deck if we are to save ourselves and humankind from self-destruction.

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