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THE FABC AND ECOLOGICAL ISSUES

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Introduction

Although the documents of the *Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences* (FABC) had been consistent and insistent on ecological issues all along, there has not yet been a separate document of the FABC exclusively dedicated to these issues.¹ In the wake of the ever-unfolding ecological relevance for today's world, recently there was a special seminar sponsored by the FABC on Climate Change in Bangkok from 19th to 20th October 2011,² during which the Secretary General of the FABC Archbishop Orlando Quevedo assured the delegates that the emerging mega-trend of ecology will certainly be a topic at the forthcoming 10th Plenary Assembly of the FABC which is due in November 2012 in Vietnam. Of late, the FABC has also decided to institute a special FABC Desk for ecological issues. Keeping in mind such recent developments within the FABC with regard to the inevitable ecological question, what we intend to do in this article is to highlight and discuss only some of the salient issues related to ecology that

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¹At the time of writing this essay, the Office of Theological Concerns (OTC) of the FABC is involved in bringing out a special document dedicated to Ecological Issues, entitled "Towards Responsible Stewardship of Creation: An Asian Christian Approach" which hopefully should see light within the next year or so.

²Some of the contents of the talks given at this seminar are used below in this article. Hopefully, all the talks of this seminar will be published soon.

emerge in the Final Statements of the FABC Plenary Assemblies³ and in the documents of the Office of Theological Concerns (OTC).⁴

Situating the Issues at Stake

It was the conciliar document *Gaudium et Spes* which acknowledged that the “joy and hope, the grief and anguish“ of the world are also the “joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ,” and encouraged the Church to read the *signs of the times* and respond to them accordingly.⁵ Undoubtedly, the emerging ecological issues of our world are such signs of the times at this moment of our history. With so many unprecedented natural disasters and calamities in Asia during the past decade or so, the Asian Churches are rightly concerned about such issues, as is evident from the recent keen interest shown in them by the FABC itself. Unprecedented earthquakes, tsunamis (especially the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004), tornadoes, typhoons, cyclones, torrential rains and floods, heat waves, forest fires, droughts,...etc. that have been witnessed in various parts of Asia recently have certainly propelled ecological issues to the top-most agendas of many Asian nations today. Similar natural calamities in other parts of the globe, too, seem to be the forceful if not the violent way through which Mother Nature is now drawing our attention to ecological issues.⁶

³These Final Statements of the FABC Plenary Assemblies are considered as the “highest authoritative“ statements within the FABC corpus of documents which “provide the general orientations and foundational theological positions for later elaboration and systematization. See Edmund Chia, “Thirty Years of FABC: History, Foundation, Context and Theology,” *FABC Papers* 106 (April 2003) 38.

⁴The Office of Theological Concerns (OTC) of the FABC which was formerly known as the “Theological Advisory Commission“ (TAC) consists of bishop-members and theologian-members appointed by the different member Conferences of the FABC), and has issued their own group reflections on various theological/pastoral topics relevant to Asia. These reflections are an effort to deepen the FABC teachings enunciated by the FABC bishops. For a collection of these documents, Cfr., Vimal Tirimanna, ed., *Sprouts of Theology from the Asian Soil: Collection of TAC and OTC Documents (1987-2007)*, Bangalore: Claretian Publications, 2007. Henceforth, this source-book will be referred to simply as *Sprouts*. The latest OTC document which was published after the publication of this particular collection, is entitled “Being Human in the Changing Contexts of Asia Today,” Cfr. *FABC Papers*, 2011.

⁵Cfr., *Gaudium et Spes* (1965) No.1,11.

⁶Asian nations are also now waking up to the brutal reality of some evitable man-made disasters that can wreak havoc on nature, such as the Fukushima nuclear disaster in Japan in 2010, and the Bhopal disaster in India in 1984.

Already in 1996, the Theological Advisory Commission (TAC) of the FABC in its document "Asian Christian Perspectives on Harmony" noted:

Many of the issues raised on the global level and in the "South" are particularly relevant for Asia, namely, sustainable agriculture, deforestation, pollution, protection of oceans and coastal areas, population control, and environmentally-sound management of biotechnology and hazardous wastes. It is only the most shocking examples of environmental breakdown which fully engage the public. Full-blown disasters, such as the poisoning of slum-dwellers at Bhopal in India, or the fatal spills of toxic gases and wastes in South Korea or Thailand generally elicit an immediate government response. There are, however, other kinds of ecological problems less well known to people. These include soil erosion, the despoiling of watershed areas, wetlands and fishing zones, loss or ruin of farmland due to industrial expansion, and increased disease and morbidity caused by air pollution.⁷

The document then went on to name the harmful use of pesticides, insecticides and fertilizers; pollution of atmosphere due to the increased concentration of "greenhouse" gases; deforestation and logging; the increased depletion of marine resources and the use of coastal waters as a dumping ground for wastes;...etc., as serious ecological issues which Asia faces.⁸

Basic Catholic Teaching: *Humans are called to be Responsible Stewards of Creation/Nature*

Just as in the Bible, creation is the starting point for the Church's teaching as a whole on the environmental issues. In the story of Genesis, God the creator sees everything that he creates as good, and it is that good creation that is handed over by the same creator-God to the humans when he says to have 'dominion' over it. As one writer points out:

While dominion was taken to mean power by early Christian theologians, another more frequent modern interpretation of it is "stewardship" – a responsible care for the planet, rather than an abusive, arrogant exploitation of it for the good of human beings with no thought of other creatures, the planet itself, or future generations of humanity.⁹

While the older idea of 'dominion' (in its literal sense) suggested humanity's right to the Earth, the contemporary idea of 'dominion as

⁷TAC of the FABC, "Asian Christian Perspectives on Harmony," No. 1.3, as reproduced in *Sprouts*, 116.

⁸Cfr. *Sprouts*, 116-117.

⁹Catherine Pepinster, "The Green Pope," *The Tablet* (4 September 2010) 11.

stewardship' suggests not so much a right as a duty. And this duty, according to Pope Benedict XVI, puts human beings in a relationship, both with God the Creator, and with our fellow humans, to whom (and with whom) we have a shared responsibility.¹⁰

As the question of ecology began to surface in the 1970's, the Church, reading the 'signs of the times' in this regard and interpreting them in the light of the gospel began to exhort "all men/women of goodwill". Already in 1971, in his *Octogesima Adveniens*, Pope Paul VI warned: "by an ill-considered exploitation of nature, man risks destroying it and becoming in his turn the victim of this degradation." He added:

Not only is the material environment becoming a permanent menace – pollution and refuse, new illnesses and absolute destructive capacity – but the human framework is no longer under man's control, thus creating an environment for tomorrow which may well be intolerable. This is a wide-ranging social problem which concerns the entire human family.¹¹

During his long pontificate, Pope John Paul II often did not hesitate to express his grave concern on profit-motivated technology that ignores ecological ethics. According to him, the essential meaning of the God-given human 'dominion' over the rest of the creation "consists in the priority of ethics over technology."¹² He wrote: "It is the Creator's will that humans should treat nature not as a ruthless exploiter, but as an intelligent and responsible administrator."¹³ This Catholic insistence on humans being responsible caretakers or stewards of the earth is repeated by Pope Benedict XVI: "Human beings legitimately exercise a *responsible stewardship over nature*, in order to protect it, to enjoy its fruits and to cultivate it in new ways, with the assistance of advanced technologies, so that it can worthily accommodate and feed the world's population."¹⁴

What are the main Catholic arguments in favour of an environmental ethics? Pope Benedict's teaching on environment, for example, is completely connected to faith and morals. His discourses and writings reflect two strands of Catholic teaching: its concern with the care of Creation and the honour given to the works of the Creator,

¹⁰Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate* (2009) No. 51.

¹¹Paul VI, *Octogesima Adveniens* (1971) No. 21.

¹²John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis* (1979) No. 16.

¹³John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Asia* (1999) No. 41. See also *Centesimus Annus* (1991) No. 37.

¹⁴*Caritas in Veritate*, No. 50 (italics in the original text).

together with the concern for the poorest in society, on whom degradation of the environment has the greatest impact.¹⁵ The moral imperative that ensues from this understanding is: *to act responsibly and in solidarity towards creation and to share resources of creation more justly.*

This basic Catholic sense of responsible stewardship is also expressed often by the FABC. For example, the TAC document on “Asian Theological Perspectives on the Church and Politics,” No:1.7 says: “God has made the cosmos as an integrated whole. The human being was made the crown of creation, which he/she must use and care for in a spirit of reverence and respect for its proper nature within the overall design of God.”¹⁶ The last of the pastoral recommendations of the Ninth FABC Plenary said: “Episcopal conferences and dioceses should establish pastoral programs focused on the stewardship of creation.”¹⁷

FABC Teachings on Ecological Issues

FABC teachings on Ecological issues are based on the central Catholic tenet that humans are called to be responsible stewards of God’s creation. They are very much in line with the universal magisterial teaching on the same issues as can be seen below. However, every now and then, one finds in them a few uniquely FABC nuances that enrich the same teachings in the Asian context, and make them more relevant for Asians. Some of these typically FABC characteristics are discussed under the sub-headings, below. In what follows, we will be briefly highlighting the link between the universal magisterial teaching and the FABC teaching, while at the same time underlining the peculiarly FABC concerns and nuances. The reader also needs to notice the intrinsic links among each of these sub-heading, themselves, in various ways, and they are in no way isolated one from the others.

1) Respect for Nature and Asian Harmony

According to some authors, Pope Benedict, too, hints at “the interconnectedness of the planet and the need for complete harmony

¹⁵Pepinster, 10.

¹⁶TAC, “Asian Theological Perspectives on the Church and Politics,” No. 1.7 as re-produced in *Sprouts*, 73.

¹⁷The Final Statement of the Ninth Plenary Assembly of the FABC (2009) No. G-4.7 as re-ptoduced in *FABC Papers* (February 2010) 33.

if it is to function and survive."¹⁸ As evidence, they cite his statement: "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."¹⁹

In the FABC documents too, though the ecological issues are placed within the fundamental framework of harmony, what is meant by the word 'harmony' here is very different from the Papal use of the same word above.²⁰ For the FABC, the term harmony is not only the lived Asian ethos, but it also has a special significance in the sense of diversity being seen as richness, as part of the whole, and not something to be got rid of:

Asians are not as quick to divide large metaphysical concepts in two as traditional Western Aristotelian thought has done for millennia. Asians prefer to unite, not divide. Good and evil are less two sides of a coin than places on a large prism... the emphasis here is on achieving wholeness, mystical unity, Oneness.²¹

Taking 'harmony' in this very exclusively Asian sense, the Fourth Plenary Assembly of the FABC said:

The positive aspect is represented by the holistic view of reality. Asian religious cultures see human beings, society and the whole universe as intimately related and interdependent. Fragmentation and division contradict this vision. In the light of the Gospel, how does the Christian base the struggle for peace, justice and wholeness in this holistic vision provided by the ancient religions of Asia? The negative aspect of religious fundamentalism challenges the Christian to witness to the radicalism of the Gospel of love, even in the most provocative, intricate and exasperating situations, and to be an instrument of unity and fellowship among various groups.²²

¹⁸Pepinster, 11.

¹⁹Pepinster, 11.

²⁰For a comprehensive idea of this peculiarly FABC concept of harmony, see the TAC document entitled "Asian Christian Perspectives on Harmony" (1996) as re-produced in *Sprouts*, 111-166. See also Edmund Chia, "Harmony in FABC's Theology," in Vimal Tirimanna, *Reaping a Harvest from the Asian Soil: Towards an Asian Theology*, Bangalore: ATC Publications, 2011, 101-117.

²¹Thomas Fox, *Pentecost in Asia: A New Way of Being Church*, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002, 41.

²²The Final Statement of the Fourth Plenary Assembly of the FABC (1986) No. 3.1.10 as re-produced in Gaudencio Rosales and C.G. Arevalo, *For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of f Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents from 1970 to 1991*, Quezon

The ecological question or the harmony and balance of the natural environment in relation to human life is a fundamental one for the FABC. Thus, BIRA IV/11 stresses the “inextricable” connection between the destiny of humankind and the way they cultivate the earth and share its resources.²³ Thus, the FABC could say:

Harmony with nature requires humans to reject an anthropo-centric view of the universe, and to respect all of creation as the *vestigia Dei*. This respect generates a harmony which reflects God’s providential love for his creatures. Humanity is called to discover in the universe God’s very presence (Ps 104,109), and to co-create with him making the earth more fruitful.²⁴

2) Respect for Nature and Primal/Indigenous Religions

The oneness of human existence and nature are evident from both the Genesis creation accounts and the Wisdom literature in the Bible. Accordingly, creation has an order written into it by the Creator. Pope John Paul II in his 1990 peace day message said:

Theology, philosophy and science all speak of a harmonious universe, of a “cosmos” endowed with its own integrity, its own internal, dynamic balance. *This order must be respected*. The human race is called to explore this order, to examine it with due care and to make use of it while safeguarding its integrity. (No:8)

Moreover, the Judeo-Christian tradition has always held a healthy balance between the subtle oneness and the difference between the Creator and the creation by insisting that God is one with His creation (immanence) but also that He is above and beyond it (transcendence). And with the stewardship bestowed on humans, creation needs to be cared but it also needs to be harnessed for human well being in and through what is today called sustainable development, rather than through an all out exploitation of creation. This is expressed by Pope Benedict XVI in his 2010 message:

They also open the way to a new pantheism tinged with neo-paganism, which would see the source of man’s salvation in nature alone, understood in purely naturalistic terms. The Church, for her part, is concerned that the question be approached in a balanced way, with respect for the “grammar” which the Creator has inscribed in his

City: Claretian Publications, 1992, 181. Henceforth, this important source-book will be referred to simply as *FAPA-I*.

²³Cfr. TAC, “Asian Christian Perspectives on Harmony,” as re-produced in *Sprouts*, No. 4.9, 152.

²⁴Cfr. TAC, “Asian Christian Perspectives on Harmony,” No. 5.1.13, 157.

handiwork by giving man the role of a steward and administrator with responsibility over creation, a role which man must certainly not abuse, but also one which he may not abdicate. In the same way, the opposite position, which would absolutize technology and human power, results in a grave assault not only on nature, but also on human dignity itself. (No:13)

The FABC's Theological Advisory Commission document on 'harmony' said:

In the final analysis, the problem of environmental protection is this: How to induce members of human societies to opt for a state of sustainable equilibrium, instead of continuing environment-damaging trends in eco-system exploitation. Asian societies, due to their cultural and religious heritage of communion with nature and love for "mother earth", are better equipped than Western societies to cope with this problem.²⁵

Here, what we need to note carefully is the manner in which many Asian cultures and religions consider creation/nature not merely as an 'object', but also as a 'subject' with which human existence is in a mysterious harmony. Damaging or hurting nature, accordingly would damage/hurt humans, too, as evidenced by popular Asian cultural/religious beliefs as exemplified mainly in and through the tribal or indigenous religions.²⁶ The use of personal terms such as "mother earth", etc. by Asians certainly have their roots in primal religions in which nature is part of human existence, and never separated as an 'object' or a 'commodity' to be used/abused. Under the sub-title "Respect for Life in Primal Religions," the OTC document on "Respect for Life in the Context of Asia" had this to say:

Respect for life in the primal religions, particularly in the Philippines, is based on the belief in the sacredness of life in all its aspects. It is largely associated with respect for nature since the Supreme God is viewed as a distant God. The natural order of events is attributed to certain spirits that govern certain phenomena and prevent chaos from prevailing in the cosmos. Nature's cycles, particularly seasons and the cycle of agriculture, allow life to go on in an orderly fashion. Thus, the relevant spirits were first addressed before practically any undertaking, or even many ordinary activities.²⁷

²⁵As re-produced in *Sprouts*, No. 2.23, 127.

²⁶Some of the beliefs and practices of these primal Asian religions are still alive and vibrant in the Asian ethos.

²⁷OTC, "Respect for Life in the Context of Asia," as re-produced in *Sprouts*, No. 2.6, 397.

The document goes on to speak on tribal religions:

Respect for nature is manifested in the way the people address other creatures and even inanimate objects. Human beings are regarded to be composed of three or four of the following elements – earth, water, fire and wind. Sometimes, other elements come also into the picture. When a person dies, his or her body returns to the elements and thereby nourishes the earth. This is a cycle of taking and giving. It is considered a great sin to abuse the balance of nature.²⁸

A similar idea resonates in the TAC document on Harmony when it said: “Harmony and peace call for respect for the earth. She is the mother of whose dust we are made and to whose womb we shall all return. The usurpation of the fruits of the earth by some and deprivation of others of the same results in the rupture of harmony among peoples.”²⁹

3) Nature is not a Commodity to be Consumed but a Mystery to be Experienced!

In his message for the World Peace Day in 2010 Pope Benedict XVI says: “Many people experience peace and tranquillity, renewal and reinvigoration when they come into close contact with the beauty and harmony of nature. As we care for Creation, we realise that God, through Creation, cares for us.”

While Pope Benedict leans more on an aesthetic sense when he speaks on the environment, the Asian sense of the same is more of a mystical sense. Thus, the TAC document on ‘Harmony’ also says:

Since “human greed, leading to misuse and plundering of nature, poses a serious threat to survival of our human family”, BIRA IV/12, 1991, recalls the urgent responsibility of believers of all faiths to open themselves to the voice of nature and its mystery, to return to the primordial attachment to and respect for nature, to grow in a creation-centred spirituality, to come together in silence and love before creation, to accept that God-given order and harmony of nature, to counteract the forces of exploitation and ruin, because “harmony with nature brings harmony of hearts and harmony in human relationships” (no. 33-34).³⁰

²⁸OTC, “Respect for Life in the Context of Asia.”

²⁹TAC, “Asian Christian Perspectives on Harmony,” No. 4.9 as reproduced in *Sprouts*, 152.

³⁰TAC, “Asian Christian Perspectives on Harmony,” No. 5.1.1.3, 157.

All the major contemporary religions of the world were born in Asia, and all of them have deep roots in what may be called a “creation spirituality.” Such a spirituality is certainly against unbridled consumption which is a characteristic of contemporary materialism which in turn is promoted by the culture of free market economy. For the FABC, that means a way of life that is in a symbiotic relationship with creation/nature, which would not exclude a respectful and responsible harnessing of nature. Such a spirituality based on creation/nature, is fundamental to Asian ethos. The TAC document on “Asian Theological Perspectives on the Church and Politics” spoke of creation spirituality as a “special concern” of the FABC when it said:

“Creation spirituality” which has been much spoken of in recent times should provide the foundation for respect of the environment and greater regard for the integrity of creation. Our common concern for ecological issues should claim greater interreligious openness on our part.³¹

Needless to say that within a framework of such a creation spirituality, any and every ruthless plundering of creation for unbridled human consumption becomes a serious matter, not only in a spiritual sense, but also materially as the OTC document on “Spirit at Work in Asia Today” said:

In most Asian countries the growing industrialization and urbanization, coupled with an exploitation of the natural resources in mining and ecological destruction of local forests, seas and wildlife, threatens the existence and livelihood of indigenous peoples who are used to traditional ways of life based on symbiotic relationships with nature.³²

The OTC document on “Respect for Life in the Contexts of Asia” spoke contemptuously: “The long-term ecological balance is sacrificed for short-term economic gains in the systematic and sometimes unbridled destruction of our Asian forests and water resources.”³³ The Ninth FABC Plenary Assembly while talking on ‘Eucharist in Asia’, hit the nail on the head in this regard when it said:

³¹TAC, “Asian Christian Perspectives on the Church and Politics,” No. 3.3 as reproduced in *Sprouts*, 108.

³²OTC, TAC, “The Spirit at Work in Asia Today,” No. 1.4, as reproduced in *Sprouts*, 187.

³³OTC, “Respect for Life in the Context of Asia,” No. 17, *Sprouts*, 381.

Creation and human labour have become victims as well. The Eucharist restores belief in the Creator and respect for creation and human labour as gifts, not as commodities to be manipulated for consumerist goals. Disrespect for creation and human labour leads to destruction and death. Only in the recognition of their giftedness will they become truly signs of the Creator's life and love.³⁴

4) The Destruction/Exploitation of Asian Resources

Already, Pope John Paul II said in 1990: "Faced with the widespread destruction of the environment, people everywhere are coming to understand that we cannot continue to use the goods of the earth as we have in the past."³⁵ In his World Day for Peace message of 2010, Pope Benedict reminds of the need for responsible use of creation: "The environment must be seen as God's gift to all people, and the use we make of it entails a shared responsibility for all humanity, especially the poor and future generations."³⁶

Already Pope John Paul II had spoken of "the Creator's will that man should treat nature not as a ruthless exploiter but as an intelligent and responsible administrator."³⁷ In Asia, as in many Third World countries elsewhere, there is a double exploitation of nature: exploitation of human persons and exploitation of natural resources. Thus the Fifth Plenary Assembly of the FABC could say:

We are deeply conscious, therefore, that within our context of change there is the unchanging reality of injustice. There remains in Asia massive poverty. Hundreds of millions of people are debarred from access to natural resources. Exploitation of the environment destroys precious resources and thus destroys the material and spiritual habitat of many of our peoples.³⁸

The TAC's "Asian Perspectives on the Church and Politics" was more explicit on this point:

While modern progress has provided the opportunity of mobilizing the secrets of nature for the welfare of human beings, it has also

³⁴ The Final Statement of the Plenary Assembly of the FABC (2009) No. C-7, in *Sprouts*, 19.

³⁵ Pope John Paul II, "Peace with God the Creator, Peace with All of Creation," Message for the World Day of Peace (1990), No. 1.

³⁶ Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate* (2009), No. 48. See also his Message for World Day of Peace (2010) No. 2.

³⁷ John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Asia* (1999) No. 41.

³⁸ The Final Statement of the Fifth Plenary Assembly of the FABC (1990) No. 2.2.1 as reproduced in *FAPA-I*, 276.

produced an ecological crisis that has threatened not only human beings but the very life-support system of this earth. With the increase of pollution, the disturbance of the delicate balance of nature, the depletion of the ozone layer, the increase of dangerous radiation, the loss of forest cover, and the destruction of species of flora and fauna, the human habitat, so delicately provided for by the Creator, is gravely endangered. Aware of this danger, people have advocated a stop to the mindless exploitation of the environment and are now stressing the need for harmony with the cosmos, which must be cared for if we expect it to continue sustaining human life. Many are protesting against the dumping of wastes and transfer of pollution industries to poorer countries and are advocating a greater simplicity of lifestyle, in order to protect the environment.³⁹

The later TAC document "Asian Christian Perspectives on Harmony" also spoke about the above-mentioned double-exploitation:

The moral character of development cannot exclude "respect for beings which constitute the natural world." There must be an awareness of the fact that "one cannot use with impunity the different categories of beings, whether living or inanimate – animals, plants, the natural elements – simply as one wishes, according to one's own economic needs." Natural resources are limited, some are not renewable. "The direct or indirect result of industrialization is, ever more frequently, the pollution of environment with serious consequences for the health of the population." This is a moral question. "The dominion granted by the Creator is not an absolute power" (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, no. 34).⁴⁰

5) A Problem Imposed on the Poor by the Rich

In our world, there are natural calamities that happen in the process of creation's inner dynamics (such as in the process of evolution) which may also include some natural disasters and those that are due to sheer mishandling of nature by human beings. Accordingly, we may call them "acts of nature" and "human acts" (in a strict moral theological sense), respectively. That is, there is a difference between 'natural disasters' in a literal sense and disasters in/of nature caused by human beings. Global warming, for example, is clearly man-made,

³⁹"Asian Perspectives on the Church and Politics," No. 1.7 as reproduced in *Sprouts*, 73.

⁴⁰"Asian Christian Perspectives on Harmony," No. 4.9 as reproduced in *Sprouts*, 152.

and in this sense, a human act – humans are responsible for it.⁴¹ That is to say that it is human agents who cause the latter type of disasters. But with regard to such humanly-infused natural disasters in Asia, who are the *real* 'human agents'? It will be naïve to say that only this or that group of people are responsible for the present pathetic state of affairs with regard to world ecology. While all inhabitants of our world, present and past, need to take some responsibility for the environmental mess we are in today, statistics stubbornly point out that the rich nations and their allies in developing nations of Asia, have to bear the main responsibility for the current pathetic state of affairs with regard to the environment. Dividing the evolution of the ecological issue into three historical phases, Dr. Saleemul Huq of the International Institute for Environment and Development based in London, says:

My view of the evolution of climate change is what I call the phase, the evolution of three eras. The first era started off with climate change very much with the environmental problem, about the emission of green house gases and how we reduce that emission of green house gases. The second era moved into development. It started looking at the impacts of climate change, potential impacts, real impacts that is already happening and how do you deal with these, particularly in the developing countries where it is mixed with development. So many of the actors, the changes that brought in new actors have come on board for development communities... And now, I think we are now entering into what I call the third era which is re-framing of the problem as a justice problem or more correctly, an injustice problem. It is the problem created by the rich but the poor are going to suffer the consequences. And that's not right. And that is a moral question.⁴²

Already in 1992, the TAC's "Asian Perspectives on the Church and Politics" said:

Disrespect for the sanctity and order of creation and increasing misuse of the natural resources of Mother Earth, often determined by foreign investors and local capitalists, are threatening the life of masses. While the poor masses are struggling to survive amidst adverse economic conditions and with a lack of minimum sanitary facilities, the rich and

⁴¹For a detailed discussion of this point, see Vimal Tirimanna, "Stewardship in Solidarity: Catholic Moral Response to Global Warming," *Catholic Theology and Thought*, 64 (2009/Winter) 152-178.

⁴²Dr. Saleemul Huq speaking on "Introduction into the Complex Problems of Climate Change in Asia," at the two-day special seminar on Climate Change, organized by the FABC, in Bangkok, Thailand, from 19th to 20th Oct.2012.

the powerful are bulldozing through their multinational projects which not only rape and consume the natural resources, but rob the land of its natural beauty. These are clear instances of how the unlimited greed of the rich can be a direct threat to the survival of the poor.⁴³

One needs to notice that there is a clear implication here that it is the rich developed nations and their cronies in the developing countries who are hand-in-glove when it comes to exploiting the environment in Asian countries. This is made explicit later in the same document:

The poorer countries have become aware that they have become the dumping grounds of highly polluting industries and of toxic wastes from the richer countries. They have become more sensitive to the ecological damage which is often the price of rapid industrialization. They realize that their valuable natural resources are being destroyed at an inordinate rate, largely for the benefit of a few in their own countries and for the benefit of the richer countries.⁴⁴

As Pope Benedict XVI puts it: "The desire to possess and to exploit the resources of the planet in an excessive and disordered manner is the primary cause of all environmental degradation."⁴⁵ Thus, inherently linked to the issue of ecological destruction in developing countries (including those in Asia), there is also the greed for profit and ruthless exploitation of resources, both of which in our contemporary world are in turn, linked to the globalization of market economies. Cahill explicates the issue at stake as follows:

Some authors, accentuating the dynamic and even evolutionary process through which life has emerged and changed on earth, call on humans to be 'co-creators' with God in realizing new possibilities that can benefit humanity. Yet the global ecological crisis that has become ever more apparently acute over the past five decades, seen in light of the doctrine of creation, prompts a different analysis. Here human hubris is responsible not only for degradation of the natural environment, but for pervasive social injustice in human use and abuse of natural resources. Both the commodification of nature and the spread of exploitative human relations have been exacerbated in

⁴³ "Asian Perspectives on the Church and Politics," No. 2.6.

⁴⁴ "Asian Perspectives on the Church and Politics," No. 4.1.9, 92.

⁴⁵ Benedict XVI, "Win the Battle against Hunger and Malnutrition," The Address of the Pope to the World Food Summit, during his visit to the FAO Headquarters in Rome on 16th November 2009, as re-produced in *Zenith: The World Seen from Rome – Daily Dispatch*, November 16, 2009.

the global economy by the dominance of a world market system under the control of the elites in the 'first world'.⁴⁶

In other words, in remedying or arresting the ecological damages to our planet earth, it is the rich developing nations who need to bear a major share of responsibility. Hence, the Kyoto Protocol spoke of "common but differentiated responsibilities" of nations. But unfortunately, the cheapening of the Kyoto Protocol (especially on the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions) by some leading industrialised nations like the USA, is not a healthy sign. Neither are the attitudes of the emerging economic giants like India and China, are encouraging for a healthy environment. The much publicised and fatally compromised Copenhagen summit in 2009 and even the recent Durban summit (2011) are interpreted by some commentators as fiascos thanks to such negative and non-cooperative attitudes.⁴⁷

Together with many people, also with Asians, I was in Copenhagen and witnessed in a very concrete way how the industrialized and emerging countries did not take over their responsibility with regard to a binding and ambitious follow-up agreement for the Kyoto Protocol. The politicians of this world could neither in Copenhagen nor within the United Nations overcome their national egoism. Their actions are not oriented towards the global common good. This would be necessary in order to avert the suffering ahead of the entire human family and the Creation. A "Keep on!", as we had so far, will lead to irreversible consequential damages for many Asian countries. The experts will show us the scientific facts.⁴⁸

Genuine stewardship (in our closely inter-linked contemporary world) which includes a sense of responsibility in solidarity, would necessarily imply that all nations should take steps to protect our common ecology by proportionately reducing the emission of toxic gases that affect the ozone layer, which in turn create havoc with climate changes. The developed nations and the emerging giants among the developing nations have reached where they are economically today, by polluting air proportionate to their growing

⁴⁶Lisa Sowle Cahill, "Creation Ethics," in Gilbert Meilaender and William Werpehowski, ed., *Theological Ethics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, 15.

⁴⁷Cfr., Fredrick Nzwilli, "Outcome of Climate Talks not good for Poor Nations, Say Global Christian Leaders," *Catholic News Update – Asia*, 16th December 2011; Gwynne Dyer, "Suicide Pact at Durban," *The Island*, 16th December 2011.

⁴⁸Mons. Josef Sayer, Director General of Misereor, in his Welcome Introduction at the recent special Seminar on Climate Change organized by the FABC in Bangkok, Thailand, from 19th to 20th October 2011.

industries.⁴⁹ But while they harness fruits of their industrial projects, the poorer nations have no such industrial benefits, but they nevertheless have to suffer the same ecological catastrophes though they have not been the culprits in polluting the air! This surely is not fair. As Elizabeth Johnson points out “economic poverty coincides with ecological poverty, for ... the poor suffer disproportionately from environmental destruction.”⁵⁰ This is corroborated by the United Nations’ *Human Development Report* 2011, which says:

...countries with higher incomes have higher carbon emissions. Moreover, adverse environmental factors in countries with higher income will enhance world food prices by 30-50 per cent in real terms with volatility in the coming decade and with harsh repercussions for poor households living in low income countries. The projections add to the current understanding that most disadvantaged people would bear most of the cost of environmental deterioration, although their contribution to the problem is relatively less.⁵¹

The Report goes on to say:

Emissions per capita are much greater in very high HDI countries than in low, medium and high HDI countries combined, because of many more energy-intensive activities, such as driving cars, using air conditioning and relying on fossil fuel-based electricity. Today, the average person in a very high HDI country accounts for more than four times the carbon dioxide emissions and about twice the emissions of the other important greenhouse gases (methane, nitrous oxide) as a person in a low, medium or high HDI country. Compared with an average person living in a low HDI country, a person in a very high HDI country accounts for about 30 times the carbon dioxide emissions. For example, the average UK citizen accounts for as much

⁴⁹During the recent FABC special Seminar on Climate Change, in Bangkok, Thailand, from 19th to 20th October 2011, Prof. Ottmar Edenhofer convincingly demonstrated how the generation of wealth by nations of our world is directly proportionate to their emission of carbons and other toxic gases into the atmosphere, and how the same is inversely proportionate to their “carbon debt”. This point is corroborated also by the *Human Development Report* (2011). See “Sustainability and Equity: A Better Future for All,” *Human Development Report*, New York: United Nations Development Programme, 2011, 3.

⁵⁰Elizabeth Johnson, “Losing and Finding Creation in the Christian Tradition,” in D.T. Hessel and R.R. Ruether, ed., *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-being of Earth and Humans*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Centre for the Study of World Religions Publications, 2000, 15.

⁵¹Cfr. “Sustainability and Equity: A Better Future for All,” 6.

greenhouse gas emissions in two months as a person in a low HDI country generates in a year.⁵²

So, as most of the authors point out, “the world’s most disadvantaged people suffer the most from environmental degradation and disproportionately lack political power.”⁵³ This is something which the FABC has been insisting on, in many of her documents.

6) Openness to Interreligious Relations in Ecological Issues

One of the characteristics of the FABC since its very inception in 1970’s is the promotion of a dialogue with the great religions of Asia. Even some 30 years later at the Special Synod for Asia held in Rome, “interreligious dialogue” was “the most talked about issue” in the Asian bishops’ interventions, and “it was certainly acknowledged as part and parcel of Asian reality.”⁵⁴ The Fourth Plenary Assembly said:

In every situation, the whole Church is called to a dialogue of life with fellow Christians of other churches, the billions of other religions and the members of various social groups. Since the laity live in a more direct and day-to-day contact with people of other faiths, they are the ones most called to this living dialogue, especially regarding common problems which affect the life of the community.⁵⁵

One of the global problems on which this dialogue could bear visible fruits in the contemporary world is with regard to the contemporary ecological questions. Hans Küng has been arguing now for years, for a new global ethic (that includes environmental issues) that needs to be promoted and inspired by world religions.⁵⁶ This has become even more evident since the under-achievements of the recent summits in Copenhagen and Durban which betrayed the missing links of world political ethics, especially a sense of responsibility in solidarity. Today, one notices that global political responsibility certainly has the need of spiritual aspects. It is only religions that can re-introduce “the

⁵²Cfr. “Sustainability and Equity: A Better Future for All,” 24. See also, p.3. (Here, HDI= Human Development Index).

⁵³Saman Kelegama, “Human Development Report 2011,” *Sunday Island*, 4th December 2011.

⁵⁴Edmund Chia, “The ‘Absence of Jesus’ in the VII FABC Plenary Assembly,” *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection*, 63, 12 (1999) 895.

⁵⁵The Final Statement of the Fourth Plenary Assembly of the FABC (1986) No. 3.1.11, as re-produced in *FAPA-I*, 181.

⁵⁶Cfr., Hans Küng, *Global Responsibility: In Search of a New World Ethic*, (trans. John Bowden), London: SCM Press, 1991.

missing dimension in statesmanship."⁵⁷ The effective role which world's religions could play in promoting the cause of ecology today is highlighted by Gottlieb as follows:

Once focused on environmental crisis, the resources of religion have a distinct – and I would argue enormously valuable – role to play in trying to turn things around. It is not just a matter of tens of thousands of Catholics, Methodists, or Buddhists joining Greenpeace or demonstrating to demand stricter fuel-efficiency standards (not that those would not be good things)! If the environmental crisis means that religion has to change, it is also the case that over centuries religions have developed powerful resources to help us understand and respond to critical forms of suffering and injustice. To begin with, we should remember that for hundreds of millions of people religion remains the arbiter and repository of life's deepest moral values. In this context, religions provide a rich resource to mobilize people for political action.⁵⁸

In No:15, of his World Peace day message in 1990 Pope John Paul-II had already said:

Even men and women without any particular religious conviction, but with an acute sense of their responsibilities for the common good, recognize their obligation to contribute to the restoration of a healthy environment. All the more should men and women who believe in God the Creator, and who are thus convinced that there is a well-defined unity and order in the world, feel called to address the problem. Christians, in particular, realize that their responsibility within creation and their duty towards nature and the Creator are an essential part of their faith. As a result, they are conscious of a vast field of ecumenical and interreligious cooperation opening up before them.

The Ninth Plenary Assembly of FABC said:

An urgent concern for the Christian churches is how to bring stewardship of creation to the core of Christian spirituality and discipleship. While caring for the earth is universally recognized as necessary for the survival of the planet and the human race, it is often perceived as nothing more than a worthy cause. Catechists, biblical scholars, theology professors, spiritual directors, pastors, religious communities and basic ecclesial communities should work together to provide formation in stewardship of creation as constitutive of

⁵⁷Cfr., Hans Küng, *A Global Ethic for Global Politics and Economics*, (trans. John Bowden), London: SCM Press Ltd., 1997, 119-121.

⁵⁸Roger S. Gottlieb, "Religion and Ecology – What is the Connection and Why Does It Matter?" in Roger S. Gottlieb, ed., *Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, 12.

Christian discipleship. The way we deal with creation influences our dealings with human beings too. There is much to learn from the wisdom and practice of other faiths with regard to caring for the earth.⁵⁹

The 5th Plenary under the sub-title, "Hope at the Crossroads," had already said that such a dialogue would not only result in a 'holistic spirituality' but would also enable us to learn from other faiths:

Dialogue between religious traditions, the ecological movement, and aspects of the women's movement offer hope for a more holistic spirituality... At the heart of the ecological movement, likewise, can be found a theology of creation, or better, a spirituality of creation - creation as the divine handiwork and the place of divine presence. Desire for spirituality, for the contemplative, on the one hand, and the possibility of convergence of the sacramental tradition, of the contemplative tradition in other faiths, of concern for the environment, of respect for the feminine, on the other - these for us are great signs of hope.⁶⁰

Such a holistic spirituality does not insist only on an extreme stand of ecological conservation that negates any development, nor does it insist on an equally extreme stand of development at any cost. Rather, it insists on a sustainable development that harnesses the environmental resources in such a responsible manner that it also makes sure to preserve the same environment if not regenerate it. After all both sustainable development and preservation of ecology are for the human beings, and not the human beings are for any of them! Neither development nor preservation of ecology is an end in itself. Also, ruthless destruction of ecology cannot be a legitimate means to a just end, that is, development.

7) Ecological Issues are "Life and Death Issues"

Last but not least, let's not forget that the emerging ecological issues all over the globe are life and death issues. This is precisely why Cardinal Karl Lehman inserted in the 2006 report of the German Bishops, "Climate Change: A Focal Point of Global Intergenerational and Ecological Justice" the crucial paragraph: "Global climate change probably represents the greatest existential threat for the present and, to a much greater extent, for coming generations As those to

⁵⁹The Final Statement of the Ninth Plenary Assembly of the FABC (2009), No:C-7, as re-produced in *FABC Papers* No.129 (February 2010), 19-20.

⁶⁰The Final Statement of the Fifth Plenary Assembly of the FABC (1990) No. 2.3.4, as re-produced in *FAPA-I*, 278.

whom God entrusted Creation as a loan, we humans bear responsibility for its well-being."⁶¹

Since Pope Paul VI's *Populorum Progressio* in 1967, the Papal magisterium has never failed to speak of issues that threaten the integral human development as issues that threaten the very human lives. Pope John Paul II said in 1990:

The most profound and serious indication of the moral implications underlying the ecological problem is the lack of *respect for life* evident in many of the patterns of environmental pollution. Often, the interests of production prevail over concern for the dignity of workers, while economic interests take priority over the good of individuals and even entire peoples. In these cases, pollution or environmental destruction is the result of an unnatural and reductionist vision which at times leads to a genuine contempt for man.⁶²

The Pope went on to say: "Respect for life, and above all for the dignity of the human person, is the ultimate guiding norm for any sound economic, industrial or scientific progress."⁶³ In his World Peace Day message in 2010, Pope Benedict followed the same line of thought and was explicit in including threats to ecology, too, as threats to human life.⁶⁴

As already mentioned, in contemporary lived reality of many countries in Asia, ecological damages and their repercussions have really become life and death issues. The 2004 Asian tsunami which killed thousands of people in Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Thailand and India was an alarming eye-opener of the new millennium. Then, the various unprecedented recent bizarre events of death accompanying climate change, destroying the lives of so many persons through droughts, irregularities of the rainy seasons and accompanying severe floods, such as the ones we witnessed recently in China, Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos, the Philippines, Thailand, Pakistan and Bangladesh, the earthquakes in Taiwan, China and Japan, the cyclones and hurricanes in the Philippines, Myanmar and India, etc. are clear signs that death due to ecological catastrophes are at the door of many Asians. Add to this, the predicted calamity that could

⁶¹Pepinster, 10-11.

⁶²John Paul II, "Peace with God the Creator, Peace with All of Creation", Message for the World Day of Peace (1990) No. 7.

⁶³John Paul II, "Peace with God the Creator, Peace with All of Creation", No. 7.

⁶⁴Benedict XVI, "If you Want to Cultivate Peace, Protect Creation", Message for World Day of Peace (2010) No. 1.

take place when the North/South Pole glaciers continue to melt as they do now, due to global warming, that is, the rising of sea water level, and the disappearance of many Asian coastal cities, and especially the disappearance altogether of smaller low-lying island countries like the Maldives. Then, there are millions of Asians, especially farmers and peasants, whose lives are at stake because they fully depend on agriculture which in turn depends on regular climate patterns which are now drastically changing in recent years. The list is endless. For most Asians, then, the question of ecology is certainly a question of their very survival, a matter of life and death!

Thus, already in 1995, under the sub-topic, "Major Pastoral Areas of Discipleship," the Sixth Plenary Assembly of the FABC said:

Ecology is once again brought to our pastoral attention. And urgently so, since we see in the countries of Asia the continuing and unabated destruction of our environment – waters, forests, plant and animal life, air – and the support systems of all created life. Life, especially in a Third World setting, is sacrificed at the altar of short term economic gains. The Lord, the Giver of Life, calls our discipleship in Asia into question on the time bomb issue of ecology. Choosing life requires our discipleship to discern and act with other faiths and groups against the forces of ecological destruction.⁶⁵

At the same Assembly, the bishops opted for a holistic vision of respect for human life when they said:

We turned our attention to whatever threatens, weakens, diminishes and destroys the life of individuals, groups or peoples; whatever devalues human beings, conceived, born, infant, old; whatever socio-cultural, religious, political, economic, or environmental factor that threatens or destroys life in our countries. We identified some of these forces of death at work in Asia. And we concluded that as promoters of life, we could only denounce them.⁶⁶

Five years later, at their Plenary Assembly in Sampran, Thailand, the Asian bishops repeated their commitment to this holistic view of life when they spoke of a "vision of life with integrity and ethical concern of the FABC,"⁶⁷ at the request of many Asian bishops, the OTC made a

⁶⁵The Final Statement of the Sixth Plenary Assembly of the FABC (1995) No. 15.4, as re-produced in Franz-Josef Eilers, ed., *For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents from 1992 to 1996*, Vol.2, 11. Henceforth, this source-book will be referred to simply as *FAPA-II*.

⁶⁶*FAPA-II*, No. 7, 83.

⁶⁷See Vimal Tirimanna, "A Few Ethical Contours that Emerge from the FABC Teachings for an Asian Moral Theology," *Asian Horizon*, 4,1 (June 2010) 40-43.

special study on this theme and published a document entitled "Respect for Life in the Context of Asia." Under the sub-topic "Ever Increasing Threats to Life, it listed ecological destruction as one such threat to life:

The disturbance or the destruction of environment clearly affects human beings and their very lives, in a negative way. The green house effect, pollution in our cities, and even natural calamities (such as droughts and floods) are clearly the consequences of the disturbance of that harmony with nature. The last named consequences can in turn negatively affect soil productivity, and thus, the agricultural efficiency of rural peasants is significantly reduced. Air pollution and inefficient waste management are major problems and they cause many illnesses, especially respiratory, particularly for the urban poor families, often heralding their death.⁶⁸

Conclusion

The Catholic responses to the contemporary ecological issues are centred on the rich biblical concept of stewardship, the idea that we are responsible for caring for the earth's resources and preserving them for future generations. As Dubois writes:

Prominent in those responses has been the recognition that those most vulnerable to environmental degradation are the poor, as rising temperatures and variations in rainfall have a disproportionate impact on developing countries. Indeed, what might be said to be most distinctive in recent Catholic thought on the environment has been this willingness to see climate change as potentially a humanitarian as well as an environmental catastrophe, as an issue of social justice – hence Pope Benedict's inclusion of a discussion of stewardship in what was a social encyclical.⁶⁹

A careful combing through of the FABC documents would tell us that this is precisely what the Asian bishops have been saying all along, that is, that in Asia, ecological issues have become acutely social justice issues. As we tried to elaborate in this article, the FABC's concerns for ecology are not radically different from what the universal magisterium teaches. But the FABC makes an effort to concretize and contextualize those teachings to fit into the Asian ethos and Asian challenges arising from the ecological issues.

⁶⁸"Respect for Life in the Context of Asia," No. 1.7, as reproduced in *Sprouts*, 381.

⁶⁹Martin Dubois, "Try a Little Empathy," *The Tablet*, 23 April 2011, 20.