



AN URGENT CALL FOR ECOLOGICAL CONVERSION, HOPE IN THE FACE OF CLIMATE EMERGENCY

“We know that all creation is groaning in labor pains even until now; and not only that ... we also groan within ourselves as we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies”

(Romans 8:22-23).

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

In 1988, we issued a groundbreaking Pastoral Letter on Ecology entitled, ***“What is Happening to Our Beautiful Land?”*** In its opening paragraph, we noted, *“Our small farmers tell us that their fields are less productive and are becoming sterile. Our fishermen are finding it increasingly difficult to catch fish. Our lands, forests and rivers cry out that they are being eroded, denuded and polluted. As bishops we have tried to listen and respond to their cry. There is an urgency about this issue which calls for widespread education and immediate action...”*

Three Decades of Commitment to Ecological Concerns

Since 1988, we have sustained this concern about ecology that runs through our subsequent pastoral teachings. We may recall that in 1998 we collectively expressed in ***A Statement of Concern on the Mining Act of 1995***, highlighting the ill effects of mining operations both on the environment and on the people, particularly indigenous communities. In 2000, we issued ***Water is Life*** calling for a concerted effort to address the problem of water insecurity and the urgency to protect our remaining watersheds. In 2003, we issued ***Celebrating Creation Day and Creation Time*** to introduce the celebration of Creation Day on September 1st of every year and the observance of Creation Time between September 1 and October 4. In 2008, we issued ***Upholding the Sanctity of Life (20 years after the CBCP Pastoral Letter ‘What is Happening to our Beautiful Land?’)*** not only to reaffirm our rejection of irresponsible mining and illegal logging operations but also to crucially include the challenges of global warming and climate change among *“the new threats to our environment”*. In 2013, we issued a ***Pastoral Statement on the Recent Earthquake and Typhoon that Devastated the Central Region of the Philippines*** to express our solidarity with the victims of calamities and to preempt their future recurrence. We also remember that in 2015, we clearly manifested that climate action is an issue of life and justice through the statement entitled ***Stewards, Not Owners***: *“Climate change has brought about suffering for nations, communities and peoples. It is that kind of suffering that, in the words of Benedict XVI’s ‘Deus Caritas Est’, ‘cries out for consolation and help’.”* (n. 28). *When they who are in need cry out, it is not an option to respond. It is an obligation.* In all these statements, we have taken for granted that concern for our environment is an essential dimension of our pastoral ministry.

The Continuing Destruction of Our Common Home

Given the high rate of poverty in the Philippines, the need to manage the environment is paramount. Poverty and environmental degradation mutually reinforce each other. ‘In today’s world, hunger, violence and poverty cannot be understood apart from the changes and degradation affecting the environment.’ Pope Francis’ recognition of this led him to introduce an

eighth work of mercy in 2016: ‘care for our common home’. He expressed this in his message for the 2016 World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation. This new work of mercy, he insisted, should be both corporal and spiritual.

Biodiversity is also a concern that has a direct connection to poverty and development. The poor in the rural areas are directly dependent on biodiverse resources for food, fuel, shelter, medicine and livelihood. This variety of living organisms together with its environment provide critical services that are necessary for survival such as air and water purification, soil conservation, disease control, and reduced vulnerability to disasters such as floods, droughts and landslides. When these resources or their environment are subjected to pressures that exceed their capacity to be resilient or to bounce back to their original state, imbalance in the ecosystem is created, leading to degradation. When situations like these arise, they make lives, especially in the rural areas, more difficult; they also make development efforts more challenging.

Our remaining forests and biodiversity are continually being threatened by extractive mining operations and the building of dams. Respect for God’s creation is disregarded when irresponsible mining practices are allowed to continue. Land and life is desecrated when almost two-thirds of the ancestral domains of indigenous peoples and more than half of protected and key biodiversity areas are directly threatened by mining applications and operations. Despite evidences against 26 mining operations ordered closed or suspended last February 2017, not one mine has stopped extracting because of technical administrative loopholes. Social justice is not served when only the few mining companies, many of which are also owned by political leaders, reap the benefits from mineral extraction. The rural poor remain poor as mining only contributes less than one percent to our GDP, employs less than 0.4% of our labor force and directly threatens agriculture, forestry, watersheds and fisheries resources that are essential for the survival of the rural poor.

Another problem related with mining is the phenomenon of our country’s growing dependence on fossil fuel-based energy, such as coal. There are at least 23 existing coal-fired power plants operating across the country; 28 more may be operational by the year 2020. To support and sustain this dependence, a huge number of coal power plants involved in extensive coal extraction has to be put in place. Thus, coal mining projects have been allowed to increase to 186, including small-scale ones. Worse is, most of these coal projects are located within the vicinity of communities of indigenous Filipinos and are supported by rich ecosystems and biodiversities.

Centuries of emissions from coal have been scientifically proven to be among the lead causes of the current climate degradation. Coal projects also further exacerbate the vulnerability of impoverished host communities in the Philippines already struggling to cope with the effects of the worsening climate. Many coastal and agriculture-reliant communities face the loss of their livelihood because of land conversion and the pollution of resources caused by coal. Health problems also plague such communities due to the toxic substances and heavy metals released into the air and water resources by the mining, transporting, and burning of coal.

The burning of coal and other fossil fuels and the destruction of nature are natural consequences of extractive mining. Needless to say, these industries are pursued primarily for profit accumulation and rarely, if at all, in response to peoples’ needs. This is the root cause of the continuous escalation of greenhouse gases in the earth’s atmosphere which, in turn, is causing the climate crisis. The climate crisis has thus far claimed tens of thousands of lives, displaced millions of people, and brought about tragic devastation in many parts of the world. This climate crisis is bound to get much worse in the years ahead.

We affirm the prevailing science of climate change that the present global warming is due to the abnormal buildup of greenhouse gases (GHGs) in the atmosphere which traps the heat and makes the earth dangerously warm. The IPCC scientists have a very solid consensus that global warming is not caused by natural factors (e.g., volcanic activity, variations in the earth's orbit and axis, or the solar cycle) but by GHGs coming mainly from two unsustainable human activities. One is the reliance on fossil fuels (e.g., oil, natural gas, coal) and other non-renewable energy sources since the advent of western industrialization in 1750. Another is the massive deforestation that deprived the earth of the sufficient forest cover needed to absorb carbon dioxide (CO₂) and other GHGs.

The Philippines, being an archipelago, is prone to climate-induced disasters brought about by sea level rise, storm surges, prolonged droughts, and flash floods, among others. We are known to be the second among the countries with the greatest exposure to disaster risks worldwide. We are at the doorstep of all the major threats of climate change which cause irreversible damage to agriculture, marine resources and the entire bio-networks. Moreover, extreme weather events are occurring more frequently in our country. The catastrophic super typhoons like Yolanda, Ondoy, Sendong, and Pablo, that have devastated several of our regions, attest to this level of climate vulnerability. On record, Yolanda (Haiyan) is the strongest tropical cyclone ever to make a landfall on our country. The damage from Yolanda was catastrophic, resulting to an estimated 8,000 casualties, affecting 16 million people in 10 provinces, while over 1.1 million homes were damaged, about half of them completely destroyed. The sources of livelihood of an estimated 5.6 million poor people were severely affected.

Climate-related disasters threaten us all. The reality of the climate crisis, proven by the catastrophic impact of typhoons and other human induced-disasters, has made us aware that the time to act is now, not tomorrow. We must activate climate action on behalf of the voiceless people and the planet.

Laudato Si' and the Care for Our Common Home

On June 18, 2015, as the global leaders were preparing for the climate summit in Paris, Pope Francis issued *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home*. The encyclical highlights the adverse impacts of the climate change on the poor and most vulnerable. Pope Francis aptly articulated the scale of the climate crisis: *"Climate change is a global problem with grave implications: environmental, social, economic, political and for the distribution of goods. It represents one of the principal challenges facing humanity in our day. Its worst impact will probably be felt by developing countries in coming decades."* (LS, 25)

Laudato Si emphasizes the underlying moral and ethical context of our ecological problems and the call for meaningful commitment, not just for the Church, but for all people, because what is at stake is our common home! Pope Francis calls for a re-evaluation of the prevailing models of global development and a redefinition of our notion of progress so that it can truly serve the common good. For the Church, climate change is an urgent issue that is clearly related to our Christian responsibility to care for the earth and to care for the poor and vulnerable in our midst.

In December 2015, at the 21st Conference of Parties (COP21) of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in France, the Paris Agreement was also adopted calling all nations to act on the climate crisis *by keeping a global temperature rise this century well below 2 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels and to pursue efforts to limit the temperature increase even further to 1.5 degrees Celsius.*¹ The Holy Father, then, said that "its

implementation will require unanimous commitment and generous dedication by everyone” and nations “pay special attention to the most vulnerable population . . . to carefully follow the road ahead, and with an ever-growing sense of solidarity.”²

In 2018, however, three years after the Paris Conference, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reported that we have only 12 years left before reaching “the tipping point” of 1.5°C above the pre-industrial temperature. This means, starting 2019, we have only 11 years remaining to act. Moreover, the UN report on 4 May 2019 warns us that failure to limit global warming to 1.5°C would lead not only to human suffering but also to the extinction of one million flora and fauna species.

During his meeting with oil industry executives and some of their biggest investors on 14 June 2019, Pope Francis prophetically declared “Time is running out!” He also insisted that “a radical energy transition is needed to save our common home.” With a sense of urgency, he declared that we are facing a “*climate emergency*” that impels us to “take action accordingly, in order to avoid perpetrating a brutal act of injustice towards the poor and the future generations.” His urgent call deserves a decisive response.

Pope Francis also expressed his unequivocal critique of dirty energy, because “most of the global warming in recent decades is due to the great concentration of greenhouse gases released mainly as a result of human activity” (LS, 23). The encyclical also strongly advocated for a clear policy direction: “We know that technology based on the use of highly polluting fossil fuels – especially coal, but also oil and, to a lesser degree, gas – needs to be progressively replaced without delay.” (LS, 165)

The Theological/Moral Basis of Our Response to Climate Emergency

The foregoing ecological analysis strongly calls *all* human beings to urgently respond to the climate crisis. As Christians, however, we have a deeper reason to be concerned with climate because it is “a common good” (LS 23) and to cause its undesirable change is “a moral issue” (St. John Paul II, *Peace with God the Creator*, no. 15). Along this line, *Laudato Si’* cites Patriarch Bartholomew who “has spoken in particular of the need for each of us to repent of the ways we have harmed the planet, for ‘inasmuch as we all generate small ecological damage’, we are called to acknowledge ‘our contribution, smaller or greater, to the disfigurement and destruction of creation’.” This challenges us “to acknowledge our sins against creation.” Foremost among them is our tendency “to degrade the integrity of the earth by causing changes in its climate” (LS 8).

In this light, our efforts to mitigate global warming and our collective moves aimed at helping others adapt to the new normal brought about by climate change may be meaningfully viewed *both* as acts of reparation for our ecological sins. We need to go beyond the prevailing meaning of reparation in a manner that includes *restitution* for the ecological damages we have done to nature.

Societal indifference to climate change is immoral as it affects even the innocent, especially “the poor who live in areas particularly affected by phenomena related to warming, and [whose] means of subsistence are largely dependent on natural reserves and ecosystemic services such as agriculture, fishing and forestry” (LS 25). Our preferential option for the poor pushes us to prioritize the most affected “poorest of the poor” who cry out to God for justice. It is our moral obligation to respond to their suffering.

Moreover, the evils of climate change are evident in the destruction of biodiversity as other living species of the planet face the risk of becoming extinct due to their inability to adapt quickly to the changes that we have caused. Pope Francis laments, “Because of us, thousands of

species will no longer give glory to God by their very existence, nor convey their message to us. We have no such right” (LS 33). Creatures “have a value of their own in God’s eyes” (LS 69, 221) and they have the *inherent right* not only to exist but also to fulfill their particular function in the community of life (i.e., ecosystem) and to reach the fullness of life as far as their nature would allow. If we recognize that all created realities originate from the Creator, we must also see to it (Psalm 24:1) that they are respected and valued.

Biblical Basis of Our Effort to Care for All Creatures

The Book of Genesis tells us that when God looked at all that he had created, he “saw that it was good.” He “blessed them, saying, ‘Be fertile, multiply, and fill the water of the seas; and let the birds multiply on the earth’” (Gen 1:21-22). God placed Adam in the garden he had planted in order “to till it and to keep it” (Gen 2:15). He also assigned humans to exercise stewardship over all the creatures that inhabit sea, air and land (Gen 1:26-28). After the flood, God made a covenant with Noah and his descendants “and with every living creature ... that never again shall all creatures be destroyed by the waters of a flood” (Gen 9:9-11).

We likewise believe that because “the Word became flesh” (Jn 1:14), the whole cosmos has been renewed. As St. John Paul II concisely explained, “the incarnation of God the Son signifies the taking up into unity with God not only of human nature, but in this human nature, in a sense, of everything that is ‘flesh’: the whole of humanity, the entire visible and material world” (*Dominus et Vivificantem*, 50). Thus, with St. Paul, we hope that “creation itself would be set free from slavery to corruption and share in the glorious freedom of the children of God” (Rom 8:21).

Did not the Lord often exhort his disciples against greed and lifestyle excess (Lk 12:16-21)? Did he not teach us to trust in Divine Providence and learn from the birds of the air and the wild flowers of the field? (Mat 6:25-34)

Intergenerational Responsibility and Solidarity

In *An Open Letter of the Filipino Youth to the Catholic Church in the Philippines*, the Filipino youth verbalized some *sentiments* related to ecology while drawing a *roadmap for the celebration of the Year of the Youth (YOTY) in 2019*. They expressed their dream “of a safe and sustainable world to live in” as they “value Mother Earth and all of God’s creation.” They also emphasized “the importance of caring for our common home,” stressing in particular the “need to realize that our seemingly small actions can either have a greatly positive or negative impact.

In response, through our *Pastoral Letter for the 2019 Year of the Youth*, we recognized their “being vital members of the Body of Christ, the Church” and assured them that they are “beloved, gifted, and empowered. We challenged them to participate in the Church’s mission as “we all long for a better world and society, and for a renewed Church.” We exhorted on them to boldly carry out their important role as “protagonists of this change, as the dynamic force of the Church now,” and to “reach out to the peripheries to bring Jesus and His message of salvation to the lost, the least and the last, including other young people... who yearn to be loved, gifted and empowered.”³

In *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis is asking: what kind of world are we leaving to the next generation? For him, “intergenerational solidarity is not optional, but rather a basic issue of justice, since the world we have received also belongs to those who will follow us . . . An integral ecology is marked by this broader vision.”

While many “*young people have a new ecological sensitivity and a generous spirit, and some of them are making admirable efforts to protect the environment,*” they are also aware that “*they have grown up in a milieu of extreme consumerism and affluence which makes it difficult to develop other habits*” (LS, 209). The encyclical likewise points out that today’s “*young people demand change*” and they “*wonder how anyone can claim to be building a better future without thinking of the environmental crisis and the sufferings of the excluded*” (LS 13).

We also owe it to the next generation of Filipinos to ensure ecological integrity and biodiversity conservation for their own benefit in their own time. We must reject the current ways of excessive production and consumption, which get us habituated to wasteful living. Ignoring the political and developmental constraints in the current initiatives towards amending the 1987 Constitution could pave the way towards the deletion of the people’s right to a safe and sound ecology, and remove the legal barriers to an all-out foreign exploitation of our national resources.

Rights of Nature and Integral Ecology

Believing in “integral ecology” in all aspects of life is a necessary response to the global crisis, says Pope Francis. “*Since everything is closely interrelated, and today’s problems call for a vision capable of taking into account every aspect of the global crisis,*” he suggests that we now consider “*some elements of an integral ecology, one which clearly respects its human and social dimensions.*” (LS, 137)

The recognition of the Rights of Nature is at the core of the call for ecological conversion, as Pope Francis emphasized in his speech at the United Nations General Assembly in September 2015. There he suggested that a “*true ‘right of the environment’ does exist because we human beings are part of the environment. We live in communion with it, since the environment itself entails ethical limits which human activity must acknowledge and respect. Any harm done to the environment, therefore, is harm done to humanity.*”

The prevalent anthropocentric and utilitarian perspectives tend to negate our traditional role of responsible stewardship and deny the reality that humans are part of nature. Both the book of Genesis and our own indigenous folklore about the origin of humankind manifest strongly that we were created out of nature’s very elements—earth, water, wind and fire.

We need a paradigm shift in order to reestablish our sacred relationship with nature: “*Nature cannot be regarded as something separate from ourselves or as a mere setting in which we live. We are part of nature, included in it and thus in constant interaction with it.*” (LS, 139). Indeed, we are all part of nature.

A paradigm on ecological conversion needs to usher in a new awareness: that mother earth cries for justice and not just for a token of environmental protection and care. The cry of mother earth is as equally urgent as the cry of the poor for social justice.

Call to Action and Ecological Conversion

In his message for the World Day of Peace in 1990, St. John Paul II insisted that the environment should be our common concern, and that this concern has an essential moral and religious dimension. There he also pointed out that care for the earth and the call to ecological conversion should be treated as an urgent issue in the Church. We are to take the advocacy for a sustainable ecology seriously because it is an integral aspect of our responsibility as Christians. He said,

"Christians, in particular, realize that their responsibility within creation and their duty towards nature and the Creator are an essential part of their faith."

Today, guided by Pope Francis' encyclical, *Laudato Si*, we again call on everyone to care for the earth and for the poor and embrace 'integral ecology' for the sake of our common home. We have to act in order to be able to stop the deterioration of our planet. United in our commitment to the Universal Church, and truly convinced that integral ecology is inseparable from an integral society, we make a definitive pledge to respond to the climate crisis—securing a sustainable future for our people and our planet.

We recall again the message of our Pastoral Letter in 1988: *"Our faith tells us that Christ is the center point of human history and creation. All the rich unfolding of the universe and the emergence and flowering of life on Earth are centered on him. (Eph. 1:9-10; Col 1:16-17). The destruction of any part of creation, especially, the extinction of species defaces the image of Christ which is etched in creation"*.

For our continuing reflection, we also commit to celebrate the **Season of Creation** as a way of integrating our ecological advocacy to our prayer and liturgical life as urged by the Pastoral Statement of the CBCP Permanent Council in 2003.

As your pastors, we call for a continuing ecological conversion in all our Metropolitan Provinces, Dioceses, Parishes and Basic Ecclesial Communities — to discern the issues and actively care for the earth in personal, communitarian and institutional levels. The voices of faith must be an indispensable part of our continuing efforts at framing the agenda for collaborative ethical action.

Therefore, we in the Church, consistently caring for our common home, commit to abide by the following ecological convictions:

- The Earth is our home. We are to care for our common home. We are to act in order to protect all life forms on Earth, from ridge to reef.
- Even while we dream of fullness of life in the hereafter, our Lord teaches us to let His kingdom come and His will be done, "on earth as it is in heaven" - meaning, already in the here and now. We are therefore duty bound to act and resist all forms of destruction damaging our people and our planet.
- We are connected to the Earth, just as our lives and the life of all other beings are interconnected with each other.
- We hear both the cry of the Earth and the cry of the Poor. We are to respond and act together in order to mitigate the ill effects of climate change on our planet and our communities; and in the spirit of accountability, we demand climate justice.

Concretely, we call upon the dioceses to implement that decree in the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines, which categorically calls for the setting up "an ecology desk in social action centers" that would make ecology their special concern.⁴ And spearheaded by our revitalized ecology programs in our diocesan and parish ministries, we commit to live the spirit and principles of *Laudato Si* through the following concrete ecological actions:

1. Integrate the care of creation as our common home in our teaching and practice of Christian discipleship. (Psalm 8:4-9)
2. Live simply, minimize consumption and actively promote ecological awareness and action through integral waste segregation and by minimizing the use of plastic and paper, by eliminating single-use plastics, polystyrene and the like, from our homes and institutions.
3. Prevent and reduce biodiversity loss by growing indigenous plants and trees, expanding forests through rain forestation, resisting destructive mining, dirty energy, the unbridled construction of roads and dams, as well as projects that cut into forested and protected areas. Implement programs that will allow the growth and recovery of forests, ecosystems and biodiversity.
4. Promote diversified and sustainable agriculture. Avoid the genetically modified agricultural products propagated in plantations and monoculture production, which destroy biodiversity and threaten indigenous lands.
5. Participate in efforts to protect and preserve our seas, oceans and fishery resources.
6. Protect our watersheds while at the same time using fresh water wisely, promoting and establishing massive rainwater collection, and putting a stop to infrastructures that can be detrimental to the preservation of ecological balance and biodiversity.
7. Push for an immediate transition to safe, clean, and affordable energy. Ensure just and fair transition to renewable energy sources and reject false solutions; support the use of solar power in our homes and institutions (dioceses, churches, schools, seminaries); promote, advocate and invest in renewable energy (solar, hydro, wind and geothermal power); join the campaign to immediately phase out coal-fired power plants and all other plants dependent on fossil-fuel, including coal mining.
8. Do not allow the financial resources of our Catholic institutions to be invested in favor of coal-fired power plants, mining companies and other destructive extractive projects. Divestment from such investment portfolios must be encouraged.
9. Integrate *Laudato Si* in the curriculum and strategic plans of Catholic educational institutions including seminaries and religious formations. Popularize and integrate the understanding of climate change and its mitigation in our formation programs.
10. Organize and educate people into a well-informed and empowered citizenry using all means available including mainstream and social media platforms for the passage of into law of bills aimed at protecting our common home, such as the Rights of Nature Bill, Forest Resources Bill and Alternative Minerals Mining Bill, and National Land Use Bill, as well as the implementation of environmental laws, such as, the Clean Air Act, Clean Water Act, and the Ecological Solid Waste Management Act. In the initiatives to amend the 1987 Constitution, any move that poses a threat to the integrity of creation, justice and peace, should be opposed.
11. Network with international bodies to create a groundswell of worldwide pressure powerful enough to convince multinational institutions to lower emissions and to actively engage in environmental actions for the protection of our common home and on behalf of the poor who are most threatened by aggressive but irresponsible industries.
12. Respect, recognize, and support the rights of indigenous peoples in protecting their ancestral domains and promoting sustainable development.
13. Strengthen adaptation measures and disaster risk management and reduction for our vulnerable communities. Advocate the prioritization of government budget allocation for climate resilient adaptation programs.

We, in the Philippine Church, are one with the Holy Father in pursuing common agenda to protect our fragile ecosystem from the threat of the continuing ecological crisis. We have the moral imperative to act together decisively in order to save our common home. This is our Christian duty and responsibility.

For the Church, the faith-based organizations (FBOs), our partners in the government and civil society organizations, living *Laudato Si* is an urgent challenge and invitation. We conclude by sharing the optimism of Pope Francis: “Humanity still has the ability to work together in building our common home.... All is not lost. Human beings, while capable of the worst, are also capable of rising above themselves, choosing again what is good and making a new start” (LS, 13, 205). Indeed, “Blessed are those who protect and care for our common home!” (From the ‘New Beatitudes of Pope Francis’)

Let us be one in prayer, confident that “*God, who calls us to generous commitment and to give him our all, offers us the light and strength needed to continue on our way.*” (LS 245)

For the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines:



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¹ <https://unfccc.int/resource/bigpicture/#content-the-paris-agreement>

² Pope Francis, Angelus Prayer, Vatican City, December 13, 2015

³ CBCP Pastoral Letter for the 2019 Year of the Youth, “Filipino Youth in Mission: Beloved, Gifted, Empowered,” Manila, December 2, 2018

⁴ Acts and Decrees of the 2nd Plenary Council of the Philippines, Part IV, Title VI, Section 4, Article 31