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Rome, September 2009

INTEGRITY OF CREATION: A CHALLENGE FOR AFRICAN RELIGIOUS TODAY

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Today's world is characterized by violence against the environment. As religious we are called to be heralds of the Gospel, in word and action, through our radical commitment to Justice and Peace, and in harmony with all of Creation. To be heralds in a secularized world means first of all that we undergo a profound conversion to the God of life, that we are open to the Gospel which liberates, and that we are reconciled with ourselves, with others and with all of creation, which God has placed in our safekeeping (cf. Gen 2, 15).

The Church in Africa is currently preparing for its upcoming Synod to be held in Rome in October. The topic of the gathering is *The Church in Africa in Service to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace: "You are the salt of the earth...You are the light of the world" (Mt. 5: 13, 14)*. This synod seeks to further develop the theme of the Africa Synod held in April 1994, which dealt with evangelization on the continent. An integral evangelization will deal with all aspects of the life of the people.

In the preface to the *Instrumentum laboris* for the Synod, it is noted that reconciliation is not limited to relations between persons and peoples. It must be extended to include all of creation, as proclaimed by Saint Paul (cf. Rom. 8:19) (*Instrumentum laboris*, p. 2). The document, therefore, indicates the essential link that exists between promotion of reconciliation, justice and peace, and the care of creation. It points out the importance of listening to, meditating on and heightening the experience of the Word of God, which is the privileged place where the wonderful plan of God is realized for individuals and for all creation (# 84). It calls for a highlighting of the values of African cultures as the riches of creation, and purifying them of all that is alien and base; such a process would contribute to producing in Africa societies which are reconciled among themselves and living together in peace and harmony rather than in conflict and hate (# 143).

Although not formally developed in the document for the Synod, care for creation is seen as an essential element in an approach that looks to promote reconciliation, peace and justice for all. Ecological problems threaten the peace and wellbeing of the people in many areas of Africa. They threaten the stability of social institutions, and at times that of the state itself. Climate change, loss of biodiversity, mining, desertification, loss of soil fertility, use of transgenic (GMO) seeds and a host of other environmental problems present situations that must be dealt with to bring justice, peace and reconciliation to the African continent.

The *Instrumentum laboris* also highlights problems related to agriculture, commenting that "proponents of Genetically Modified Food, which purports to give assurances for food safety, should not overlook the true problems of agriculture in Africa: the lack of cultivatable land, water, energy, access to credit, agricultural training, local markets, road infrastructures, etc." (# 58). The list of the world's hungry has grown by 100 million in the last year, according to the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), bringing the number of hungry people to one billion worldwide; 265 million of them live in sub-Saharan Africa. Food security is one of the most critical peace and security issues of our time. Furthermore, Africa has been among the worst hit by climate change displacement. By 2050 there will probably be 700 million people in the world displaced by climate change.

Religious congregations are invited to address these interrelated issues, in light of our charisms. This short paper will deal more specifically with the question of ecology, of care for creation. In the documents of the Church and in the *instrumentum laboris* of the upcoming Africa Synod, as seen above, we are invited to reflect on:

- The impact of ecological problems on our life.
- Their implications and consequences in the area of social justice.
- The challenges that they pose for us as religious in the African context.
- The urgent measures we need to adopt to address these problems.

As religious we base our care for creation on its sacramental nature, that is, on the footprints of Christ in the created world. The world is full of God's presence: all created things are a sign and revelation of the Creator. Therefore, deliberate destruction of any part of creation by human beings means a disfigurement of the image of Christ, present in all of creation.

As Africans we need to remember our traditional concern to preserve the sacredness of nature. We need to remember our oneness with nature, and the relationship of our ancestors with all the good things that God has created. Might not the "new values" of

globalization be emptying nature of the sense of sacredness? Christ does not suffer only when the rights and dignity of people are violated, but also when the rights and dignity of nature are violated.

Once human beings perceive creation as a sacrament, that is, as the presence and manifestation of God, and as a means of coming to God, they will feel the need to change their relationship with all creatures from one of domination and power to one of respect and reverence. But when will we come to this realization? How long will we remain indifferent to and distant from these problems and challenges? John Paul II was optimistic in this regard. He declared that: "Christians, in particular, realize that their responsibility within creation and their duty towards nature and the Creator are an essential part of their faith" (# 15, Message of John Paul II for World Day of Peace, 1 January 1990, *Peace with God the Creator, Peace with all of Creation*). In this context we religious need to ask to what extent we are challenged personally, communally and in our mission, to:

- 1) Promote not only relations of justice among people, but also relations of environmental justice.
- 2) Promote dialogue, collaboration and mutual understanding, since the integrity of creation is an essential part of all religious traditions.
- 3) Promote collaboration with Christian organizations that are dedicated to these issues.
- 4) Recognize that many of these organizations, along with many of civil society, are far more advanced in pressuring authorities to address issues of environmental justice.
- 5) Promote the awareness that addressing ecological issues is an essential part of our mission.

As religious we ought to become increasingly more committed to creation and aware of the challenges it constantly offers us:

- 1) Are we really people capable of reading the signs of the times and of being salt of the earth and light of the world?
- 2) Do we use the spirit of discernment developed in religious life in order to help bring about ecological peace?
- 3) Do we use our resources to make society aware of ecological issues and to warn people about ecological problems?
- 4) Are we aware that a commitment to reconciliation and restoring the harmony of creation is part of our charism and our spirituality?
- 5) Do we recognize the present time as a time of crisis and opportunity, which challenges us and calls us to have a more prophetic attitude?

- 6) Do we see the environmental question as a dimension of the common good, which our mission commits us to?

The first part of this short reflection has been dedicated to making us aware of our responsibility as Christians and religious to care for creation. In the spirit of the SEE-JUDGE-ACT methodology, however, we cannot be satisfied with merely raising consciousness of the problems. Rather we are, on seeing the issues to be dealt with, challenged to find concrete ways to address them in our personal, communal and ministerial lives. We must ask, personally and communally, how our lifestyle affects the environment, and what changes are demanded of us. In our ministries we need to find ways to raise consciousness of these issues and challenge those whom we serve and those with whom we work to find ways to effectively address such problems. The following is a partial listing of ways that we can become more committed to this cause.

- 1) Educate ourselves and others regarding the factors that are threatening the planet (ecological education), particularly through our preaching and teaching ministries.
- 2) Become involved politically in environmental questions; write pastoral letters or official pronouncements on ecological problems, such as the pillage of forest resources by multinational companies.
- 3) Promote interreligious collaboration on issues of the environment.
- 4) Pressure governments and authorities to commit themselves to the environment: to implement the various protocols that have been ratified for the benefit of the environment; to bolster Africa's rural economy in general by empowering and educating women, in particular through agricultural innovations such as water-wise irrigation and low/no-till farming practices¹; to promote recycling and elimination of garbage, pesticides and toxins; to monitor potentially negative multinational investments.
- 5) Pressure business people to commit themselves to the environment in regard to waste, packaging, products, etc.
- 6) Coordinate our work with that of local and international environmentalists; take part in their projects and campaigns.
- 7) Get environmentalists involved in our pastoral communities.
- 8) Support the groups that are fighting for the environment.
- 9) Adopt an individual and communal style of life that conserves resources.
- 10) Examine our habits that are modeled on consumerism.

¹ A report by several UN agencies in collaboration with Columbia University, "In Search of Shelter: Mapping the Effects of Climate Change on Human Migration and Displacement," June 2009, at <http://www.preventionweb.net/english/professional/publications/v.php?id=9870>

Many resources can be found to help us in our work for the Integrity of Creation. One new resource, developed by a working group of the JPIC Commission of the Leadership of men's and women's religious institutes (USG/UISG) is a booklet called *The Earth Community: In Christ, Through the Integrity of Creation, Towards Justice and Peace for ALL*. It can be found on the following website at <http://www.jpicformation.wikispaces.com>.