

Discussion on the Pope's Encyclical Laudato si - A Quest for Ecological Democracy by Viren Lobo

I dedicate this speech to the memory of my late Father who passed away on the 27th December. In the early Eighties, my father's articles on Wealth from Waste helped me to develop my understanding for which I spent 30 years of my life in SPWD to understand its various dimensions leading me to the complex issues related to the theory and practice of ecological democracy for which the SADED platform is more appropriate. The Pope's call is in that sense very symbolic for me as my father's name was Francis, so in this call I see continuity with break from my earlier life mission. The first discussion on this called by Shri Kishore Sant a renowned Social activist, took place in Udaipur on 13th January who was concerned that people should understand what the Pope was trying to say before linking other threads on thought on the same issue. This talk will build on the various points unfolded by him at that meeting.

The Pope begins his encyclical with a quote from St Francis of Assisi whose name he took when assuming the Papacy. *"Praise be to you, Lord, through our sister Mother Earth, who sustains and who produces various fruit with coloured flowers and herbs.* This exhortation to God through Mother Earth is significant as it makes it clear that this practice is not 'idolatry' as was commonly understood when Nature worship was branded as Paganism by the Church. The Pope then goes on to say *"This sister now cries out to us because of the harm, we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of goods which God has endowed her.... See ourselves as Lords and masters....entitled to plunder her at will.*

The Pope then goes on to cite the utterances of previous Popes (from the 50's onward) on this issue to unfold the development of the Church's thought on this serious matter. The historical sequence seems to match the Global concern for the Environment. In the 60's Richard Carty highlighted the effect of the pesticides on the Orchards of California.

- i. John XXIII in the context of the nuclear standoff as a result of the Cold War, rejected war and called for peace.
- ii. Paul VI described the ecological crisis as a *consequence of unchecked human activity.*
- iii. John Paul II decried those who *"see no meaning in their natural environment than what serves for immediate use and consumption"*. He called for a change in lifestyle and full respect for human beings.
- iv. Benedict XVI called for *"eliminating the structural cause of the dysfunctions of the world", "correcting models of growth incapable of ensuring respect for the environment"* this embraces *"life, sexuality, family and social relations"* and is *"closely connected with culture which shapes human coexistence"*

Echoes of such thought among other Christian denominations are found in the writings of Patriarch Bartholomew and "The Defense of a Peaceable Kingdom by Marshall Massey".

The Pope is unequivocal in his stand for Social Justice as an inextricable part of the concern for the Environment. He says that today, concern for the environment is reflected in the *"islands of greenery"* we find around us... *"It is clearly inconsistent to*

combat trafficking in endangered species while remaining indifferent to human trafficking”... “unconcerned about the poor”, or “undertaking to destroy another human being deemed unwanted”. Further he says “The Christian tradition has never recognized the right to private property as absolute or inviolable and has stressed the social purpose of forms of private property”. The church however defends the “Legitimate right to private property.. but she also teaches no less clearly that there is always a social mortgage on all private property in order that goods may serve the general purpose that God gave them”.

Across the world he cites examples of Catholic Bishops who embody such practice

- i. The Bishops of Paraguay have this to say *“every campesino has a natural right to possess a reasonable allotment of land where he can establish his home, work for subsistence of his family and a secure life.”*
- ii. The New Zealand Bishops questioned the meaning of the commandment *“thou shalt not kill”, “when 20% of the world’s population consumes resources at a rate that robs the poor nations and future generations of what they need to survive”.*

The meaning of sin has been defined as a break from God, neighbor and nature. Francis of Assisi was one who embodied a process of healing this rupture.

The Pope exposes the limitations of Technology and Finance to address the issues facing us today and the need for scientists and other concerned practitioners to learn from ‘believers’.

- i. *“Science and technology are not neutral”.*
- ii. *“The specialization which belongs to technology makes it difficult to see the larger picture”.*
- iii. *“The fragmentation of knowledge proves helpful for concrete applications and it often leads to loss of appreciation of the whole”.*
- iv. *“Absolute power of a financial system, a power which has no future and will only give rise to a new crisis after a slow, costly and only apparent renewal”.*

He brings home strongly the fact that

- i. *“There can be no renewal of our relationship with nature without a renewal of humanity itself”.*
- ii. *“There can be no ecology without an adequate anthropology”.*

He cautions that *“a misguided anthropocentrism need not necessarily yield to biocentrism.... which entails yet another imbalance”.* Further he says, *“Human beings cannot be expected to feel responsibility for the world unless, at the same time, their unique capacities of knowledge, will, freedom and responsibility are recognized and valued”.*

Stressing the importance of local knowledge and involvement in the context of cultural ecology he mentions the folly in *“Overlooking the complexities of local problems which demand the active participation of all members of the community”* and solution which evolve *“need to be based on the local culture itself”.*

While talking of the lines of approach he acknowledges the Global initiatives taken like the 1972 Stockholm declaration, the 1992 Earth Summit at Rio de Janeiro, Basel and Vienna Conventions. While stressing the importance of self improvement, he points out its limitation thus *“self improvement by individuals will not by itself remedy the extremely*

complex situation facing our world today”. *“Social problems must be addressed by community network and not simply by the sum of individual good deeds”*. *“Around these community actions relationships emerge develop or are recovered and a new social fabric emerges. Thus a community can break out of the indifference induced by consumerism”*. ... *“being at peace with himself or herself... peace which is much more than the absence of war”*.. it is *“closely related to care for ecology”*.

Subsequent to the publishing of the encyclical at Santa Cruz, Bolivia, on 10th July, the Pope apologises for the use or misuse of Christianity in the brutal colonisation of indigenous and other peoples. To quote from the article Resistance and Reconstruction written by Ashish Kothari

“Many grave sins were committed against the native peoples of America in the name of God. I humbly ask forgiveness not only for offences of the church herself, but also for the crime committed against the native people during the so called conquest of America”. On the question of the role of Capitalism, he had this to say at Santa Cruz. *“And behind all this pain, death and destruction there is the stench of what Basil of Caesarea called ‘The dung of the Devil’. An unfettered pursuit of money rules, the service of the common good is left behind once Capital becomes an idol and guides people’s decisions, once greed for money presides over the entire socio-economic system it ruins society and as we clearly see it even puts at risk our common home”*.

Ashish Kothari however mentions that there were some aspects of the encyclical that made him squirm, namely the reference to God as an all powerful creator. To this my reply to him was that the Pope is countering the trend where man considers him/herself to be all powerful. To the extent that mere good wishes do not amount to anything and that there are nature and societal developmental laws (distinct from manmade laws), I agree that we need to understand these and bend before these laws if we are to bring about a real change.

At Santa Cruz, the Pope concludes thus *“The future of humanity does not lie solely in the hands of great leaders, the great powers and the elites. It is fundamentally in the hands of the people and their ability to organize”*.

Discussion

Dr Onkar Mittal: Pointed out that in public discourse – the speaker should choose to articulate one’s own view, personal view point, and method of arriving at this viewpoint - instead of choosing to present the viewpoints of authorities on the issues of the day. It should then be the endeavor to search for the truth –by matching the different facets of the truth presented by different persons, instead of looking for contradicting one another’s beliefs on ideological considerations.

The views presented by shri viren lobo were that of Pope, however, who represents the Church official position. The Church, by taking refuge in the sweet talk of Pope, just to illustrate the above, cannot escape responsibility for the acts of omission and commission by the Church. There is an extreme view that capitalism is the logos of Christianity, hence, one Christianity cannot overcome capitalism – so what is the point for condemning capitalism by a church official- Can the Catholic religion reform itself. How does it respond in practice to injustice to

the injustice that has been perpetrated in its name, in the name of conversion and for the sake of conversion ? The biggest challenge to Catholic church is in Europe and people are questioning whether the new pope can save the catholic church by his sweet talk.

In the 19th century India, the British bureaucracy had purposely organized inter- religious dialogues in open public meetings , the sole practice had been to make one religious leader argue against the other religion by finding faults with each other . Today even if we try to reverse this and try to organize an inter-religious dialogue for mutual harmony, it is not going to work.

People need to leave their dogma behind, and speak to one another –person to person – one human being to another

Vijay Pratap: Talked of two aspects of the human consciousness namely belief (Astha) and discernment (Vivek). The Industrial revolution brought in its wake the age of reason. Gandhi being a Sanatan talked of Earth, Life and Crisis. The Jesuit priest Fr S Kappen talked of Jesus and his concept of freedom and the need to change the clergy to reflect this. The Church sought to censor his work but could not do so. On issues related to religiosity, Identity and Swaraj, there is a need to take up three activities.

- i. Provide a commentary on Laudato si
 - ii. Enter into interreligious dialogue
 - iii. How do we interpret the Sustainable development goals in the light of this?
- On issues related to cultural and economic efforts can we make a difference to the evaluation?

Pawan Gupta: The meaning of terms is different from our own sense of these terms. For me belief and discernment are not two different things but part of the same process. I have nothing to do with God and my journey as part of the Secular, scientific and rationalist dialogue has not been unique. I am comfortable with myself but at the same when seeing the conditions around me, it makes me very sad as I do not see much hope.

Anupam Mishra: The calendar shows the date as 1st February 2016, but the Earth is much older than this. How can religion which is much younger understand it? Who decides who can go to the temple and who cannot? Panchgavya and GM foods exist at the same time.

Nagraj Adiver: If you look at what has been written by the Pope and John Bellamy Foster, if the author is not mentioned anywhere, one cannot discern who wrote the document. I have a problem with the encyclicals view point on abortion but apart from that it is an extraordinary document covering a wide range in the discourse. In Mangalore, the Church there came out with a one page translation; there is a need for translation into other Indian languages so that there is wider discussion. The crux of the matter is what is the economic alternative to Capitalism? How does one control growth and consumption? There is a need for a detailed discussion on the scale of alternative economic logic.

Prashant Kumar: The focus should be on what science can learn from religion. To Quote from Ghalib When there was nothing there was God. If it was like this then what

will happen? We make it, all travel their own way. (Na kuch hota to Khuda hota, Yu hota to kya hota? Hum bana le, sab apne rasta chale.

Fr Denzil Fernandes: Laudato si is a radical document, released at the time when all the countries were discussing the issue of Climate change in Paris. Though it is a Christian document, it talks about Our Common Home where all have a right, including the animals, fish and birds of the air. We should not pay attention to who wrote it but work together for an alternative for a sustainable Earth. There is a tendency to look for uniformity, but this not the way of life. Adivasis for instance have sustainable solutions. We cannot uniformise any political or other system.

Laxman Pant: The once Majestic Himalayas with their snow covered peaks are now turning black due to the melting of the snow. Modern history is about 300 years old. Are there answers from those believing in Dialectical Materialism?

Fr Stanley Fernandes: This world is our home. What can we do to give it to the future generations? On the topic Quest for Ecological Democracy, we have worked on models for Integrated Watershed Development to regenerate the environment and rebuild the community. We need to look at different models for sustainable solutions to regenerate ourselves, society. With the help of knowledge and discussions, we can alter our lives make the world a better place to live in.

Vimal: Sometimes it happens that the good words emerge from the mouth of the Devil. The Society which destroyed the world is talking of how to save it ? They are simply trying to whitewash their sins. How can the ruling class find a solution when they seek their own preservation? It is for the people to define their own destiny.

Varsha: It is good to hear the Pope talking about the preservation of nature and human beings. Yesterday I went to the zoo and saw all the animals caged there, they are refugees. Why? In Delhi many live similar lives caged up in small apartments.

Kaushal Kishore: At the Council of Arles in 452, nature worship was declared as Paganism, this does not seem to tally with the Pope's version of worshipping God through nature. In today's crisis, there is a need for all religions to unite for a cultural revolution.

Roshan Lal Agarwal: When 62 people control 50% of the total wealth, there is a need to define the limits to an individual's right. This has to be based on what people need. There should be a tax on income above the average wealth and redistribution of this to the weaker sections of the society.