VERDAD Y VIDA

REVISTA FRANCISCANA DE PENSAMIENTO

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ECOLOGICAL SIN AND THE SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION

MARTÍN CARBAJO NÚÑEZ

ABSTRACT:
"To commit a crime against the natural world is a sin against ourselves and a sin against God." Therefore, Pope Francis invites everyone to implore God’s mercy, through the sacrament of Reconciliation, “for those sins against creation that we have not hitherto acknowledged and confessed.” Taking into account the Papal teachings, this article emphasizes the need to make more evident the ecological dimension in the sacrament of Penance.

KEYWORDS: Ecology, Sin, Sacrament, Reconciliation, Justice.

SUMARIO:
La explotación egoísta de la tierra es un pecado, pues “un crimen contra la naturaleza es un crimen contra nosotros mismos y un pecado contra Dios.” Por lo tanto, el Papa Francisco invita a abrazar la conversión ecológica y a implorar “la misericordia de Dios por los pecados cometidos contra la creación, que hasta ahora no hemos sabido reconocer ni confesar.” Teniendo en cuenta las enseñanzas papales, este artículo subraya la necesidad de hacer más evidente la dimensión ecológica en el sacramento de la Penitencia.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Ecología, Pecado, Sacramento, Reconciliación, Justicia.

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The encyclical Laudato Si’ introduced the concept of ecological sin, until then scarcely used in Catholic theology.¹ In doing so, Pope Francis has accepted...

the contribution that the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew had made in this sense.\(^2\) That same year 2015, establishing the World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation, the Pope invited everyone to invoke the divine pardon “for the sins committed against the world in which we live,”\(^3\) since being “protectors of God’s handiwork is essential to a life of virtue.” \((217)\)

A year later, the Pope denounced the selfish exploitation of the earth as a sin,\(^4\) because “a crime against the natural world is a sin against ourselves and a sin against God.” \((8)\) Therefore, he invited everyone to ecological conversion\(^5\) and “to implore God’s mercy for those sins against creation that we have not hitherto acknowledged and confessed.” \((WDC 2016, 2)\)

Trying to frame adequately these teachings of the ecclesiastical magisterium, the first part of this article studies the sacramental dimension of the physical world and the presence, in the liturgy of the sacraments, of signs and symbols taken from nature. This is lacking in the current Rite of the sacrament of reconciliation. The second part asserts that the acts of the penitent should reflect our personal and community responsibility with regard to the whole of creation. The third part underlines that the Rite of the sacrament should give more relevance to the joyful celebration of pardon and reconciliation graciously received from God.\(^6\)

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\(^2\) FRANCIS, «Encyclical letter Laudato Si’», [=LS], May 24, 2015, n. 7-9, LEV, Vatican City 2015. In the body of the text, the quotations of the encyclical Laudato Si’ will be indicated with just the numbers in brackets.


\(^4\) For human beings “to destroy the biological diversity of God’s creation; […] to contaminate the earth’s waters, its land, its air, and its life – these are sins.” FRANCIS, “Message for WDC”, 1-09-2016, n. 2, in OR 200 (Sept. 2, 2016) 8.


\(^6\) This article corresponds to prof. Carbajo’s contribution to the interdisciplinary course (and research) in Italian language: “Riconciliazione sacramentale. Morale e prassi pastorale,” (“Sacramental reconciliation. Morality and pastoral practice”) held at the Alfonsian Academy in Rome during the second semester of the 2017-2018 scholastic year. A shorter version of it will be published in Italian language.
1. SACRAMENTAL DIMENSION OF THE PHYSICAL WORLD

The entirety of creation is “a proto-sacrament,” a visible sign of the presence, goodness, and beauty of the Trinitarian God. Therefore, from the created things we can have a natural knowledge of God.

Everything in nature has its own value and a sacramental dimension. We need “to develop a spirituality” and a mystique that opens our eyes so that we can experience “the intimate connection that exists between God and all beings.”

The theology of creation needs to be better developed. The liturgical celebrations should enhance and highlight our relationship with the physical world. So far, the focus has been set mainly on our fallen nature, due to sin, and therefore on the need for redemption.

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7 We use the term “protosacrament” in an analog way. Karl Rahner applies it to the Church. Specifically, he affirms that Christ is the Supreme Sacrament of God’s grace. The Church, as body of Christ, continues His redemptive and saving presence in the world. Thus, she is a protosacrament, a necessary mediation that enables us to participate in the mystery of Christ. The other sacraments are self-realizations of the Church; i.e., they are acts of her actual realization. Cf. K. RAHNER, The Church and the Sacraments, Burns & Oates, Kent 1986. Edward Schillebeeckx and Piet Schoonenberg confirm that the Church is the first place of Christ’s presence in the world. Cf. J. M. KUBICKI, “Recognizing the presence of Christ in the liturgical assembly”, in Theological Studies 65 (2004) 817-837, here 821.


9 H. DENZINGER, Enchiridion symbolorum, definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum, Edb, Bologna 1995, n. 3004.


11 Christian “creed itself is overbalanced in favor of redemption. […] Creation becomes increasingly less important”. T. BERRY, The dream of the Earth, Sierra, San Francisco 1988, 126; M. FOX, Original blessing, Bear, New Mexico 1983, 54. This leads to the “conclusion that matter, the body, and sexuality are now somehow problematic, even malignant.” W. H. BECKER, «Ecological sin», in Theology Today 49/2 (1992) 152-164, here 157.