

# VERDAD Y VIDA

REVISTA FRANCISCANA DE PENSAMIENTO

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## ECOLOGICAL SIN AND THE SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION

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### 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.<sup>1</sup> In doing so, Pope Francis has accepted

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<sup>1</sup> “La tierra profanada por tantos pecados”. CATHOLIC BISHOPS’ CONFERENCE OF ARGENTINA, «Una tierra para todos», Cea, Buenos Aires 2005, 5; CATHOLIC BISHOPS’ CONFERENCE OF BOLIVIA, «El universo, don de Dios para la vida», CEB, La Paz 2012, nn. 51, 70. On the different ways of presenting ecological sin: E.M. CONRADIE, «Towards an ecological reformulation of the Christian doctrine of sin», in *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 122 (2005) 4-22, here 16-17.

the contribution that the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew had made in this sense.<sup>2</sup> 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,”<sup>3</sup> 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,<sup>4</sup> 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<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> FRANCIS, «Letter for the establishment of the *World day of prayer for the care of creation*», [=WDC], Aug. 6, 2015, in *OR* 181 (Aug. 10/11, 2015) 8.

<sup>4</sup> 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.

<sup>5</sup> Among Catholics, this concept was introduced by: JOHN PAUL II, «General Audience» Jan. 17, 2001; cf. N. ORMEROD - C. VANIN, «Ecological Conversion: What does it mean?», in *Theological Studies* 77/2 (2016) 328-352, here 330. The New Testament continually calls for conversion (cf. Mk 1:15), meaning a profound change of lifestyle, convictions, and thinking. Following Pope Francis, we will use the term “ecological conversion” to refer to the “development of new convictions, attitudes and forms of life” that arise from the awareness of a common origin and future. LS 202.

<sup>6</sup> 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,”<sup>7</sup> a visible sign of the presence, goodness, and beauty of the Trinitarian God.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, from the created things we can have a natural knowledge of God.<sup>9</sup>

Everything in nature has its own value (69) and a sacramental dimension. We need “to develop a spirituality” (240) and a mystique that opens our eyes so that we can experience “the intimate connection that exists between God and all beings.” (234)

The theology of creation needs to be better developed. The liturgical celebrations should enhance and highlight our relationship with the physical world.<sup>10</sup> So far, the focus is been set mainly on our fallen nature, due to sin, and therefore on the need for redemption.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> 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 enable 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.

<sup>8</sup> Francis of Assisi contemplated “in creatures the wisdom, power, and goodness of the Creator.” T. of CELANO, «The Life of Saint Francis» [=ICel], n. 80, in R.J. ARMSTRONG – J.A.W. HELLMANN – W.J. SHORT, ed., *Francis of Assisi: Early documents*, 3 vol., New City Press, New York 2001 [=FAED], vol. I, 171-308.

<sup>9</sup> H. DENZINGER, *Enchiridion symbolorum, definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum*, Edb, Bologna 1995, n. 3004.

<sup>10</sup> Our liturgies must celebrate “our connectedness to the natural world”. CATHOLIC BISHOPS’ CONFERENCE OF THE PHILIPPINES, «What is happening to our beautiful land», in *Boletín Eclesiástico de Filipinas* 64 (1988) 234-246.

<sup>11</sup> 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.