Embracing an Ecological Conversion: Addressing the Effects of the Ecological Crisis on the Poor and the Earth Through the Sacrament of Reconciliation

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EMBRACING AN ECOLOGICAL CONVERSION: ADDRESSING THE EFFECTS OF THE ECOLOGICAL CRISIS ON THE POOR AND THE EARTH THROUGH THE SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION

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Abstract

In the last two hundred years, the whole of creation has suffered a great deal of abuse, violation and destruction that is threatening the continued existence of creation. This plundering of the earth has resulted in various changes and disasters in the universe ranging from climate change, air and water pollution, deforestation, loss of biodiversity, decline in the quality of the human life, and massive migration. It is through creation that God first reveals himself to humanity. Any abuse or violation of creation is a sin against God. Therefore, humanity, appointed as careers or stewards, have engaged in the exploitation and violation of creation for economic and selfish reasons. If this action continues in this same direction, it is possible that humanity and all living creatures may go into extinction. In the light of this imminent ecological crisis that Pope Francis calls for an ecological conversion on the part of all humanity, individuals and nations alike. He stresses the importance of change of heart and attitude in the ways and manner in which we use and treat the creation and human beings, most especially the poor. Such a change of heart and action will invariably lead to reconciliation between God and humanity, human to human, and the human community with the environment. And it will likewise guarantee a restoration that enables the continued existence of creation and a fulfilled life for humanity.

This thesis examines a process of ecological conversion through the sacramental rite of reconciliation, which is rooted in the invitation of God to humanity to care and serve creation. It emphasizes the role of mentors and guides in the sacramental process; enumerates the church’s teaching on the ecological crisis through the eyes of Pope
Francis in *Laudato Si* and the Jesuit document, *Healing a Broken World*. It explores pertinent aspects of church’s social teaching on social sin, social responsibilities, social response; and provides formation that centers on the word of God and the prayer, both liturgical and individual, which enable conversion. At the heart of this sacramental process, it focuses ecological conversion in a carefully prepared Rite of Reconciliation itself. In order to sustain this ecological conversion and reconciliation that will ultimately lead to a restoration with God, each other and Creation, it extends the Rite with further formation in the spiritual, educational and social dimensions of ecological responsibility.

In presenting this sacramental process, this thesis calls our attention to the growing and urgent challenges of the ecological crisis and offers a faith-based response. The need to create awareness of the imminent and remote disasters that are associated with the ecological crisis, to educate the community to the importance of protecting the environment and caring for the poor, and to create a faith-based response are all critical for the future of the Earth community. The sacramental process described here can further be supported with ecological studies in schools and seminaries; through liturgical worship of God in, with and through Creation; and through regular forms of community prayer that remain attentive to the needs of the Earth and the poor and sustain the community’s conversion.
Acknowledgement

“Glory and Praise to our God, who is able to do immeasurably more than we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the Church and in Christ Jesus through all generations, forever and ever.” Ephesian 3: 20-21.

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INTRODUCTION

According to the Judeo-Christian tradition, God created the earth and entrusted its care and protection to humanity. In other words, we humans are God’s very own appointed stewards of creation. Our divine charge is the supervision, protection and conservation of all of creation for the greater good of all.

However, we humans have misunderstood our role in creation. Instead of seeing ourselves as stewards and as part of creation, we have come to delude ourselves as creation’s lord and master. Pope Francis, in recognizing this fatal error, laments it when he writes,

We are failing in the task of stewardship: so often we are driven by greed and by the arrogance of dominion, possession, manipulation and exploitation; we do not preserve nature; nor do we respect or consider it a gracious gift which we must care for and set at the service of our brothers and sisters including the future generation.

Joshtrom Kureethadam corroborates the Pope’s view when he asserts that: “at a deeper level, the ecological crisis stems from human hubris, namely, from our refusal to accept our proper identity as creatures and to acknowledge our radical dependence on the creator and our interdependence on the rest of creation.”

This arrogant and short-sighted attitude on the part of humanity has resulted in the blatant abuse and reckless exploitation of creation for vain endeavors. The misuse and abuse of creation has brought about untold hardship for both humans and the creatures with which we share this planet. It has also

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manifested itself in many human and natural disasters, such as climate change, physical and psychological hazards, water and air pollution, massive deforestation, the extinction of species and seemingly endless wars. If we continue along our present trajectory, the end result is the extinction of our species and the other 12.5 million species with which we share this planet. So long as we live outside of God’s ordained role, our hearts can never know peace. Therefore, the need for a global attitudinal change that ushers an era of ecological conversion and conservation could not be more urgent.

The relationship between God, who is the Creator and source of all things, and humanity, his appointed stewards, has been gravely disrupted. Pope Francis stresses on the negative consequences of humanity’s reckless abuse of creation when he asserts that: “the harmony between the Creator, humanity and creation as a whole was disrupted by our presuming to take the place of God and refusing to acknowledge our creaturely limitations. This, in turn, distorted our mandate to have dominion over the earth, to till and keep it.”3 We humans have convinced ourselves to be kings and conveniently forget that we are just as much a part of the earth that we abuse with such abandon. In our misuse and abuse, we sin against God’s infinite love and goodness. This transgression reflects in another dimension, namely, the senseless violence, exploitation, injustice, and evil perpetrated against each other.

In the face of this growing ecological crisis, Christian individuals and communities must honestly ask themselves in what ways they have contributed to the abuse and exploitation of the earth. A serious examination of conscience is required of

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3 Pope Francis, Laudato Si’: On Care for our common Home (Huntington: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, 2015), #48
every Christian, and it must be guided by ardent prayer and a deep desire for change to the status quo. It is this reason that the Pope Francis stresses that the ecological crisis is also a clarion call for “profound interior conversion.”

What the world needs today is a conscious reawakening and understanding of the disastrous effects that our neglect and misuse is affecting. We must open our eyes to the call of God for conversion and reconciliation, and work towards healing the relationship that has been weakened by greed and carelessness. Pope Francis illustrates that “We come to realize that a healthy relationship with creation is one dimension of overall personal conversion, which entails the recognition of our errors, sins, faults, and failures, and leads to heartfelt repentance and a resolute desire to change.”

I contend that the Roman Catholic Rite of Reconciliation, understood as a sacramental process, can be pivotal in bringing about this conversion and reconciliation between God, humanity and creation. The sacramental rite of reconciliation is a context in which we become aware of our sins and how they have affected our relationship with God and with the whole of creation. It calls us to ecological conversion, which is a change of heart, a restoration of faith in God, love for the planet from which we spring and thrive; and it cultivates a respect for the dignity of the lives of those who suffer from ecological degradation and who hope for a better and peaceful world in the future.

**Thesis Statement**

As a response to the ecological crisis and our abuse of creation, this thesis argues that the Rite of Reconciliation, understood as a process, facilitates in those who

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4 Ibid., #217
5 Ibid., #142.
participate a conscious awareness of having abused Creation – and with it Earth’s poorest peoples – which can lead to an ecological conversion that engenders responsible stewardship, a spirit of justice toward Creation and all living things, and a resolve to work towards the restoration and conservation of the Earth.

**Methodology**

This paper will employ a theological approach that situates sacramental rites of reconciliation within the context of the ecological crisis. It assumes that the process model of sacraments, introduced in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA), has significance for all other sacraments, and it conceptualizes the sacrament of Reconciliation as such a three-stage process.  

During the first stage of the process, the persons preparing to engage in the sacramental rites of reconciliation become aware of the global environmental crisis, as well as its impact on the poorest and most vulnerable of our brothers and sisters in society. Like the candidate for the rites of initiation, the person preparing for the rites of reconciliation participates in several activities: study, prayer, ritual, first-hand experience of the environmental beauty and destruction, which enables them to reflect on the Christian responsibility to care for and protect the earth. The participant is learning in a way that leads to a self-evaluation of one’s own attitude and actions and the realization that one has strayed from the gospel’s way of life. Participants deepen their awareness of

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Church teaching about the environment, reading such documents as Pope Francis’ *Laudato Si’*, and pondering how this contemporary call to people everywhere has deep implications as to how Catholic Christians live out their religious lives. Ultimately the participant is invited to embrace the “ecological conversion” to which Pope Francis calls the believer, and to prepare to express a desire for conversion in a communal celebration of the Rite of Reconciliation.

The second stage of the process focuses on the Rite of Reconciliation itself. The candidates renounce their sins against creation, thereby leading to a firmer resolution to defend the integrity of the Earth and its inhabitants especially those poor and the vulnerable brothers and sisters on whom they have inflicted needless pain and suffering. During this stage, the participants gather with the whole community to confess their sins against God, to admit to their complicity in the abuse and destruction of the earth and to profess their lack of commitment to the poor, whom they denied the right to the common good. They proclaim their faith that God is the Lord and Creator of the universe, and that human beings are the stewards of Creation. As one community, their deliberate celebration of creation is an act of worship of God. The participants, through self-evaluation, understand the social nature of sin, that sin against creation is essentially sin against oneself and against God. They come to understand that the destruction of creation has a negative impact on the lives of everyone, and most especially, their vulnerable and disadvantaged brothers and sisters. All parts of the rite, including the choice of songs, scriptural readings, and examination of conscience, lead the participant to experience a profound change of heart.
The third stage of the process, like the period of “mystagogy” in the RCIA, is a time of more learning, reflecting, and the translating the ecological conversion into practical communal action. It is during this stage that, within the context of the reconciled community, the participants become familiar with their responsibilities towards the poor and vulnerable in the society, while also engaging in acts of environmental conservation. Through prayer and the study of the Word of God, the reconciled community cultivates an attitude of responsible stewardship by not only making the necessary sacrifices, but also by adopting a mindset that abhors the waste of resources. This is a process of on-going formation on how to support and help one another in protecting, nurturing, cultivating, and caring for our one common home.

Clarification of Major Terms and Concepts

Throughout this thesis, certain terms and concepts will be significant. In what follows, I will introduce three concepts: ecological consciousness, ecological conversion, and integral ecology, followed by a brief introduction to Yoruba cosmology. Although the focus of the paper is broader than my own Nigerian-Yoruba context, I will use concrete examples that are situated in this culture at various points in the paper.

Ecological Consciousness. Christopher Uhl in his book, Developing Ecological Consciousness, argues that everything in creation participates in the earth’s cycle of exchange. Today there is need to raise awareness of the fact that we are small cells which are part of the bigger whole. Ecological consciousness stresses that all elements in nature, each in its own small measure, contribute to the effective and proper functioning of nature. Uhl affirms that “the earth is our larger body. Earth does not belong to us; rather it
is we who belong to Earth…. The human is derivative; Earth is primary.” This means that human existence depends on that of the earth. Thus, everything we need to exist as living beings is provided by the Earth. Human beings participate in nature’s generous gift, in which they also donate some part of their life force to earth’s other creatures. Therefore, we participate in the earth cycle of exchange by our common existence. Uhl stresses that, “No matter how earnestly we strive to exempt ourselves… we cannot escape our participation in nature’s cycle of exchange.” Just as we humans receive nourishment from the earth, so do we too serve as food for other elements of nature. We humans are part of the metabolic cycle of the earth’s living body. Uhl affirms that “Earth does have a metabolism, and we are part of that metabolism; Earth’s elements do cycle and we are part of those cycles.” Our exchange in terms of giving and receiving in nature is a call to a deeper consciousness of the ecological cycle that takes place in the Earth, and our role in it.

Ecological Conversion. For the past 30 years, there has been a consistent call by the last three popes for humans to desist in their persistent destruction of God’s wonderful gift of creation. The continued devastation and plundering of our planet has made clear the dire need for an ecological awareness which will prompt an ecological conversion of the human community. In our failure to appreciate, love, and care for God’s creation, humanity may be heading towards a path that could end our existence.

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8 Ibid., 32.
9 Ibid., 51.
The term ecological conversion symbolizes a paradigm shift from our present global trend.

Pope Francis, in his encyclical *Laudato Si*, argues that in order to safeguard our planet from absolute destruction, we need to raise awareness of the devastating degree of destruction we are wreaking on the environment. This ecological crisis is calling us into a “profound interior conversion”\(^\text{10}\) at the heart of our Christian vocation. Such a conversion is concomitant with our personal experience with Christ, which compels us to love God and everyone he has created. The earth is our home and must be loved, respected, cared for and preserved. This duty not only serves the common good of the current generation but also the well-being of those yet unborn. It requires that each one of us look within ourselves and acknowledge in what measure each of us may have contributed to the destruction of creation. Thus, Francis, quoting Patriarch Bartholomew, explains “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.”\(^\text{11}\) The task of ecological conversion cannot be accomplished individually. It is a communal project which requires that we humans, as a species, have a change of heart and work to save our planet from destruction. By working together in harmony to restore the integrity of creation, we build a better future for the coming generation.

Ilia Delio explains the term ecological conversion in the light of St. Francis model. She writes that ecological conversion demands a personal decision for change

\(^{10}\) Pope Francis, *Laudato Si: On Care for Our Common Home.*, #217.

\(^{11}\) Ibid., #13.
and, in turn, ignites communal desire for a positive change of heart which ultimately results in a profound change in a way of life. Ecological conversion “begins with a person taking personal responsibility for her/himself and her/his actions and continues in a reaching out to others to engage them in a collective social transformation.”

She writes, “The ecological footprint can further our conversion by helping us to perceive the impact of our choices as individuals, households, communities, and nations.” An ecological footprint becomes a measurement through which people can gauge their consumption and waste on the individual and communal scale. This conversion is what will ultimately bring about a reconciliatory and harmonious relationship with the earth and our Creator.

The Society of Jesus’ task force on ecology, in its document, *Healing a Broken World*, describes reconciliation as having a three-dimensional relationship and stresses that this relationship “is a call to establish a right or just relationship with God, with humans and with creation.” This right relationship restores communication with creation, based on the value of a just and healthy relationship with God, with other humans, and a strong commitment to justice. In other words, reconciliation with the earth is understood from the perspective that all creation has been created with the utmost care by God and has now been damaged by sin. Moreover, reconciliation is affected in the mystery of the incarnation of Jesus Christ and reaches its fullness in the Paschal mystery. “Christ created anew the relationship between God, human beings, and the created

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12 Ilia Delio, Keith Douglass Warner, and Pamela Wood, *Care for Creation: a Franciscan spirituality of the Earth* (Cincinnati, OH: Franciscan Media, 2008), 158. One’s ecological footprint can be calculated through information on the following websites ________________________________________________________________

13 Ibid., 159.

world.”¹⁵ The document maintains “that many human beings, at all levels, have continued to abuse nature and destroy God’s beautiful world… There is an irresponsible degradation and senseless destruction of the earth which is our mother,”¹⁶ that invites us to have a change of heart, and to actively seek for reconciliation. This will require a new attitude or metanoia in the way of handling God’s creation and how we relate to each other, especially the poorer and more vulnerable of our brothers and sisters.

**Integral Ecology.** The term integral ecology views the care for human well-being and that of the rest of the planet as one endeavor. Pope Francis, in his fourth chapter of *Laudato Si,* affirms that integral ecology is derived from the understanding that everything in creation is interconnected and related. Nothing in nature is isolated; we are all part of nature. He then argues that when there is any problem in any area of the environment, “it is essential to seek comprehensive solutions which consider the interaction within natural systems themselves and with the social system.”¹⁷ The implication is that social crises and environmental crises are but one complex crisis. Therefore, strategic planning is required in order to have an integrated approach to solving the problems of poverty and a restoration of the dignity of those excluded, while at the same time, protecting nature from destruction.

Pope Francis explains that there is a serious need for a social ecology that supports the health of all in society and of the societal institution itself, whose efficient functioning has positive consequences on the environment and the quality of life of all.

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¹⁵ Ibid., #40.
¹⁶ Ibid., #41.
¹⁷ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si: On Care for Our Common Home,* #139.
He also believes that special attention must be paid to cultural ecology. It is not enough to take care of what has been handed down to us. Culture is a “living, dynamic and participatory present reality, which cannot be excluded, as we rethink the relationship between human beings and the environment.”\(^{18}\) He also stresses daily ecology, because our local setting shapes our reasoning, our actions and reactions. Pope Francis explains that “in our rooms, our homes, our workplaces and our neighborhoods, we use our environment as ways of expressing our identities.”\(^{19}\) Human beings naturally try to adjust to the environment, but in some cases, when the environment is distorted, chaotic or saturated with noise and ugliness, or overstimulation, it is difficult to find ourselves integrated and happy\(^{20}\)

**Cosmology in the Yoruba Tradition.** The Yoruba live in the western part of Nigeria, like the rest of the African people, they hold that God is the Creator of the universe and thus, it is the basis of their belief about the ecological and human responsibility, that God created human beings as stewards of creation. Nwaka Christ Ebeguulem, in his article titled, Mission and Inculturation, stresses that African believes that God created the universe and is actively present in the world. He writes, “African spirituality gives a most prominent place to the Creator. God is father and mother. God is present, alive, active and remains in direct communication with creation. Although He exists with us, God is the beginning, without an end.”\(^{21}\) The Yoruba believe that God

\(^{18}\) Ibid., #143.

\(^{19}\) Ibid., #147.

\(^{20}\) Ibid., #147.

controls the events in creation; both human or animal creation are nothing but an act of God. God is alive and actively involved in the wonders of creation. God determines the working of nature to ensure that there is order in the world. God commands the time and seasons to ensure the efficacy and productivity of nature.

Furthermore, the Yoruba also believe that the universe is a sacred place because God is actively involved in nature, and which should never be tampered without careful consideration. Thus, the Yoruba have great respect for the environment. Raymond Ogunade, in his work, *Spirituality and Human Flourishing among the Yoruba*, affirms “the idea that creation of the universe is fundamental to the basic religious beliefs of the Yoruba people. Respect for the environment has always been an integral part of these beliefs. The Yoruba do not usually tamper with nature carelessly.”

Ogunade stresses that in order to preserve the environment from abuse, the Yoruba have designated some particular locations as sacred. These places are homes for the divinities, and human activities are prohibited in those places. This is to ensure that the environment is not violated or tampered with in any way. They do not allow people to fish in some rivers or streams; nor do they allow for hunting in some forests. Any disobedience is met with very serious sanctions supported by the whole community. Any act of violation or destruction of nature is regarded as taboo and punishable by the gods. This is why different ecological disasters are regarded as inflicted by the ancestors in response to defilement of the cosmos.

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The Yoruba people make deliberate and serious efforts to care for and protect the environment, for they understand that destruction of the environment carries negative repercussions for the community. This why Simon Mary Aihiokhai, a Nigerian professor of systematic theology explains that “health is tied to harmony in the cosmos. When one distorts the cosmic harmony through actions that have negative ecological implications, the consequences lead to illnesses, barrenness, and a high mortality rate.”\(^23\) In other words, every abuse against the environment invites grave consequences.

In order to protect nature, human beings were created by the *Olodumare* (God) to care for creation. Bolaji Idowu, professor of Yoruba, affirms that this Yoruba’s belief aligns with the biblical idea that human beings have a special place in the universe. He stresses the need for stewardship when he states that “a human is a tenant on God’s earth.”\(^24\) Thus, according to Idowu, human beings have the obligation to care and protect the environment from abuse. To avoid the destruction of the environment, and to foster a lifestyle that safeguards all, is an ecological responsibility for the human race. The idea of ancestorhood also helps in this regard. Simon Mary A. Ahiokhai affirms that for the “Yoruba religionists, the moral life is shaped by a faithful adherence to the regulatory injunctions in the cosmos, made real by the lives of primordial ancestors. The reward for such moral living is the attainment of ancestorhood in the Yoruba religion.”\(^25\) According to the Yorubas, attaining the status of ancestor is dependent on how well that person


harmonizes with nature and helped others to preserve and respect that harmony, and maintained the integrity of creation

Shape of the Thesis

This thesis will unfold as follows: Chapter One will describe the preparatory process of the sacrament of Reconciliation. It will consider the human response to God’s invitation, the Church’s teaching on the ecological crisis, especially *Laudato Si*. It will include air and water pollution, climate change, loss of biodiversity, deforestation, migration, as well as the disturbing rise in human socio-economic inequality. The Church’s social teaching on stewardship, the common good, social sin, communal responsibility and social repentance will also be explored. I will also construct the process to include prayers, blessings, and scripture readings as well as first-hand experiences of the suffering earth.

Chapter Two will consider the actual Rite of Reconciliation (Rite II), exploring how all elements of the rite – e.g., prayers, songs, scripture readings, examination of conscience, common penance – can facilitate a strong experience of embracing ecological conversion. It will emphasize the communal nature of the rite, the communal nature of violence against Earth, the acknowledgement of social and personal sinfulness, and the importance of embracing a communal commitment to the healing of the planetary community.

Chapter Three will explore the “mystagoical” continuation of the Sacrament of Reconciliation that involves study, reflection, study of the Catholic social teaching, and restorative actions that support and give expression to the renewed attitudes that flow from an ecological conversion. In doing so, it will explore several dimensions of this
lived conversion: spiritual, political, and educational that can help restore what has been degraded and abused and enable ecological and social harmony and well-being.

The paper will conclude with reflections on what has been learned in the writing of the work and the significance it might have for those who engage in the sacramental process involved and their respective communities.
Chapter One

PREPARATORY PROCESS OF THE SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION: CREATING AWARENESS

The first stage of reconciliation focuses on bringing the community to an awareness of the ecological crises that I described in the introduction, thereby enabling participants to acknowledge their complicity in this crisis, and to prepare to celebrate the Rite of Reconciliation as the second stage of the sacramental process. Based on the RICA, I will be including in the first stage several elements that mirror those of Initiation: for example, the role of mentors as guides; the choice of participants to respond to God’s invitation to conversion; and a study of the Church’s teaching on the ecological crisis. I will be using Pope Francis’ encyclical Laudato Si’ as a primary text, particularly its social teaching on the common good, stewardship of resources, preferential option for the poor, and a recognition of social sin. The process will include times of prayer, blessings, and scripture reading, as well as first-hand experience of the suffering Earth.

1.1 ESTABLISHING COMPANIONS: MENTORS AND GUIDES

In the first stage of the sacramental process, it is necessary to have mentors and guides to journey with the participants through the sacramental process. The aim is to help open up participants to the reality of different ecological crises in our world and the urgent need to develop a change of attitude or conversion that can help protect the environment from further destruction and desecration. To achieve this purpose, mentors use their wealth of experience to guide participants and answer questions that may arise during the process. This enables the participants to embrace a new ecological consciousness and conversion.
1.1.1 Mentors as Experienced Members of the Community

Creating an awareness and fostering a change in attitude that leads to the process of ecological conversion is the aim of this first stage of the sacramental process. It is important to have knowledgeable persons assist as guides. A mentor must have some expertise in the field of ecology. He or she may have acquired this knowledge by having gone through the sacramental program themselves. Furthermore, mentors must have integrity and faith. The mentor is expected to guide the participant in reflecting on his or her experience and lifestyle. The mentor’s personal connection with nature helps others discover their place and relationship with the environment. We find this spirit in St. Francis of Assisi, who discovered God in creation and befriended other creatures, and so was able to help his community see God in creation, to relate to other creatures as brothers and sisters and to see the earth as a mother.

Knowledge of ecological crisis. The criteria for anyone to be a mentor or a guide is that he or she has acquired sufficient knowledge and experience about the workings of the ecosystem and the environment. The mentor must personally have discovered the interconnectedness and interrelatedness that exist in the web of life and recognized that humans cannot exist independently from other creatures or the environment. Christopher Uhl states that, whether we know it or not, we are all part of the community of life on Earth: members of the Milky Way galaxy, and participants in an expanding and complex universe. 26 The mentor must also help participants come to terms with the challenges of the ecological crises, that stem from human abuse and exploitation of the earth. The

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mentor recognizes and identifies the different areas of abuse, such as water and air pollution, loss of biodiversity, deforestation, migration, and the low quality of human life and dignity. The mentor helps the participants understand the graveness of the ecological crisis and the threat it poses to human existence. Pope Francis emphasizes that there is a nobility in caring for creation through little daily actions, and it is wonderful how education can bring about real change in lifestyle. The mentor guides participants on the possible ways of cultivating new attitudes in their relationship with creation, which is the aim and goal of this first stage of the sacramental process.

*Readiness to walk with another.* The mentor must be available to walk with participants throughout the process of ecological conversion, and to meet with them regularly to share their understanding that God is the Creator of the universe, and that humanity is called to protect and care for creation. As the Catholic Bishops of the United States emphasize: “We show our respect for the Creator by our stewardship of creation. Care for the earth is not just an Earth Day slogan. We are called to protect people and the plants, living our faith in relationship with all of God’s creation.”

Therefore, the mentor’s duty is to guide the participants through the process of discovering God in creation. When we abuse and exploit creation and deny the poor and less privileged the means of their livelihood, we dishonor God. When we enter relationship with other creatures, we honor God their Creator.

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The mentor must be available to guide the participants whenever they seek clarification on any issue on ecological crisis. Furthermore, the mentor must help participants in their understanding of the importance and practice of loving creation, especially the poor. In loving one’s neighbor, the participants cultivate an attitude of generosity and love towards others. Anytime we engage in any act of charity toward our neighbors, who are most affected by the destruction of Earth resources, we honor and respect God their Creator. Hence, Denis Edwards writes, “As the Church itself is called to conversion to the side of the poor in the struggle for justice and the side of women in them for full equality, so the church itself is called to conversion to the side suffering creation.”  

It is an integral part of the mission of the church to serve as the voice of creation, to look out for the vulnerable members in society, and to foster the spirit of love and mutual respect for all creatures. Mentors are to accompany participants and guide them towards the universal kingdom of love and sharing.

1.2 INVITATION TO ENTER THE CONVERSION PROCESS

The purpose of the preparatory process is to awaken the heart of the participants to their connectedness with Creation, to experience the cry of the planet Earth, which will move human hearts to a change of attitude, to undergo an ecological conversion, and to enter into a covenantal relationship with other creatures. This creates an awareness that creation is a means of God’s revelation, included in his redemptive plan, and helps them

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to form a new attitude and orientation that will launch them into the sacramental process of ecological conversion.

1.2.1 Invitation to a Parish Community

The Church is the body of Christ called to worship, praise, and glorify God the Father through Jesus Christ through the active power of the Holy Spirit at work in creation. In the past, the church excluded creation from her worship and understood worship only as a relationship between God and humanity. The call for ecological conversion demands that we develop a new orientation, which is an awareness that our gathering to worship God includes humans and all of creation. The Church is called to be the agent of that change through education and a reformation process, which will cultivate a new attitude toward the vulnerable persons in creation. It is with this that USCCB states:

We encourage efforts to bring about discussion on issues affecting the environment (climate change, consumption, pollution, stewardship of the land) that is civil and constructive, that invokes the virtue of prudence in seeking solutions, and that is more responsive to the need of the poor, both here in the United State and aboard.\(^{30}\)

It is the work of the Church, through her leaders, to initiate the processes of change and invite the whole parish to enter into that conversion process through the enlightenment and reformation of her members. The process begins with the invitation of the participants through preaching and announcements.

The preaching which takes place during the liturgical celebration may be given either by the priest or an expert on environmental matters. It is an opportunity to explain

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to the participants the sacred nature of creation as a gift of God and the obligations of
humans to respect creation and use the gifts of creation for the common good of all
people. Thus, the USCCB encourages preachers to use homilies to reconnect the people
with their surrounding environment or immediate ecosystem and to draw the
congregation’s attention to the immediate world around them: beautiful sunrises and
sunsets, the life-giving nature of water, the beauty of clouds and mountains, but also the
cry of the earth in the face of toxic dumps in low-income neighborhoods, strip mining in
the local hills, or the sheer volume of a city’s garbage.31

Lawrence Mick argues that

...there is a great need at this point in history to help people recognize their
moral obligation to care for the environment as an important part of their
Christian faith. This means that preaching should sometimes focus on this
issue, so vital for the future of life on this planet. It would be irresponsible
for preachers of the word to ignore this issue, to conduct worship as if the
fate of the earth did not matter. To praise the Creator while ignoring the
destruction of creation does not make sense.32

Preaching therefore, should aim at enlightening the participants on the importance of the
universe as sacramental presence of God, and as our companion in the worship of God.
There needs to be more respect for human and non-human life and the dignity of all,
especially the vulnerable and the less privileged in the web of life. We need to be
cognizant of the interconnectedness and interdependence of everything in nature.
Homilies must enumerate the universal purpose of creation and the human responsibility
of being faithful stewards of creation.

31 Ibid., 10.
Furthermore, the intended rite of Reconciliation based on ecological conversion should be given priority in the announcements during the liturgical celebration. Articles about the ecological crisis, the protection of the environment, and the care of the poor should be published in the parish bulletin and website. Letters of invitation could be emailed to parishioners and text messages can be sent to their mobile phone to encourage their participation in the sacramental process.

Inquiry Session. The parish office can establish a platform where parishioners can access vital information about the preparatory process, such as time, procedure, venue, and content of the various sessions of the activities. A well-experienced or knowledgeable person in the study of ecology can educate and answer important questions for any of the parishioners seeking clarity. The parish can provide a call-in phone number with an expert on standby during specific hours to educate and create awareness for parishioners trying to find information about the preparatory process. The parish can also provide posters and handbills with different quotes and captions to attract the interest of parishioners.

Short Videos and Pictures. In order to create awareness and generate interest, it may help to show short videos highlighting the beauty of God’s creation. These short videos can serve to highlight the causes of the ecological crisis and the various human infractions against Creation. These videos could help educate participants of how the destruction of the forest reserves leads to the extinction of plant and animal species and how climate related migration leads to over-population in the urban cities. It could shed light on how climate change, air and water pollution impact negatively on the livelihood of everyone, especially the poor in our society. As Mary McGann points out,
“Conversion empowers us to embrace new patterns: a deeper commitment to healing the earth and to rediscovering worship’s creational and cosmological vitality.”\textsuperscript{33} The interconnectedness and interrelatedness of the living and non-living beings on the planet shows that everything in creation is dependent on others for sustenance. The whole process is meant to bring about a change of heart in the individual and repentance from the old way of living which is characterized by wastefulness and unsustainable over-consumption.

1.3 COMMITMENT TO THE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY THROUGH PRAYER AND WORSHIP

Once the participants have agreed to participate in the sacramental process, they are invited to a “Rite of Welcome and Acceptance” at which they formally commit themselves to the journey. This rite may include the reading of the scriptures, the pledge to protect God’s creation, prayer for the participants and their mentors, and a blessing for the journey. This process will assist the participants to establish the right attitude and disposition both morally and spiritually in their embracing the sacramental process of ecological conversion.

1.3.1 Praying and Worshipping with Creation: Personal and Liturgical Prayer

Throughout the first phase of the sacramental process, ritual prayer may be a context and guide to their participation. Participants might gather weekly, beginning their prayer by each participant bringing one broken element of nature into the place of

\textsuperscript{33} Mary E. McGann, “Making Vital Connections: Developing Creational Consciousness in Life and Worship.” Liturgy (Spring, 2012), 50.
meeting: polluted water, dry soil, unhealthy crops, which symbolize the importance of their connectedness of the whole of Creation and their responsibility to care for it. As Elizabeth Johnson states, “The kindship model of human relationship with other creatures most closely approximates reality. It sees human beings and all its creatures intrinsically related as companions in a community of life. Because we are all mutually interconnected, the flourishing or damaging of one ultimately affects all.” This implies that they are in solidarity with all other creatures in the web of life. Furthermore, the inclusion of these elements of nature in their worship underlines the importance of all creatures in the community of life and brings participants to an awareness that their communion with God is a communion with all. Norman Habel emphasize that in liturgy, we need to affirm “our solidarity with the rest of Creation by inviting all Creation to join in worship. In this process, we not only praise God for Creation, we also worship God with Creation.”

Ritual practice that includes the elements of nature shows a commitment and connectedness to other creatures and reveals God’s presence and love for all of creation. Hence, Johnson affirms, “In contemplation the human spirit learns to see the presence of the divine in nature, and so recognize that the earth is a sacred place. For such a spirit the biblical bush still burns, and we take off our shoes.” The participants may pray outdoors, as this involves closer union with nature. For example, praying near mountains can reveal the beauty and the wonders of God in creation and incite contemplation of the

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36 Elizabeth A. Johnson, Women, Earth, and Creator Spirit, 63.
infinite power behind such scale and beauty. In contrast, participants might also abstain from food and drink to show their solidarity with the poor, who have been denied the common goods of creation. They may gain first-hand experience of their watershed, spending time near a body of water, following the rhythms of the sound of the running water as a means for meditation. They may also visit sites of pollution, bless them, and, as a community, work together to clean them up. In this way, the participants commit themselves in prayer and action to honor, care for, and respect creation, and to make reparation for the abuse, exploitation, and the miseries inflicted on our common home and the injustice meted out to the poor.

1.3.2. Scripture Reading

The reading of the sacred scripture is an integral part of the first stage of the sacramental process as it opens up the heart of the participants to the Word of God and invites them retrace their steps in the way they plunder and misuse God’s gift of creation. It can open hearts and minds to the cries of the earth and the poor who bear the consequences of this abuse of creation. Hence, Habel, and others emphasize that,

Throughout the liturgical year, we listen to God’s Word’s through the reading of Scripture. In so doing, our ears may be attuned to hear the voice of the poor. Now they also need to be attuned to the voice of the Earth itself, as it groans in travail. And in all of this we can hear the gospel message that the cosmic Christ reconciles all creation to God. These voices reorient us through our listening.\(^{37}\) Participants should engage in meditation on passages from both Old and New testaments, as well as the psalms. They should dwell on the beauty of God’s creation (e.g.,

Gen.1:33), and the human call to stewardship of creation (e.g., Gen.1 26-28). The participant’s constant perusal and meditation on the Word of God will help move their hearts to the call to embracing the ecological conversion.

1.3.3 Prayers of Commitment and Intercession

In response to reading the Word of God as a community, there may be moments of sharing and meditation, strengthened by the power of God’s Word. In the course of this phase of the sacramental process, participants, individually and collectively, can commit themselves to protect, care for and love creation as a mark of respect and love for God. The participants likewise engage daily in prayer and reflection on their duty to care for God’s creation and protect the poor and the vulnerable in the society and intercede for both the suffering Creation and all whose lives have been negatively affected by the abuse of God’s creatures. All of this might be enhanced by praying the Canticle of Creation and reflecting on how his love for creation is an example for their lives.

_Earth’s Elements as Blessing._ It is important that the participants recognize that elements of nature such as water, earth and air connect human beings with the natural world and are symbols and sacraments of God’s blessings. Among these, water holds special value and importance because of its baptismal connection. Hence, Larry Mick proposes that “a prayer service focused on the gift of water could combine baptismal themes with prayer for an end to water pollution and thanksgiving for water.” Water in particular as the foundation of all life must be conceived as a means of grace. For example, participants might be led by the priest in a procession to the baptismal font.

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The water in the fount and water brought by each of the participants might be blessed, with prayer for a renewed commitment to care of the wounded Creation. The priest might then sprinkle those gathered with the holy water to signify God’s continuous blessing and to call for greater water conservation and stewardship.

1.4 STUDY OF CHURCH’S TEACHING, ESPECIALLY *LAUDATO SI*

Study of the Church’s teaching on creation creates an awareness in the hearts of the participants of the “urgent need to protect our common home.”39 When the environment is harmed, its damage directly affects our familial relationship with other human beings, especially the poor and future generations to come. The study of church documents, especially Pope Francis’ encyclical *Laudato Si*, during the sacramental process serves to educate the participants to values and attitudes to which they are invited as Catholic Christians. Participants are also being equipped with ways of preserving creation from future destruction and brought to the awareness that continued destruction can lead to total extinction of the whole human race. This sacramental process opens them up to embracing ecological conversion which, as Pope Francis underscores, is the only way to avoid this.

1.4.1. The Suffering Earth

The world is suffering today because of the harm, destruction, abuses, and exploitation by humans. How can beings appointed by God to be caretakers fall down to the level of pillagers? A large percent of the human population is living in abject poverty with not enough income to care for their family, while the earth from which we all spring

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and depend on suffers constant destruction due to our greed, selfishness and ignorance.

Pope Francis, in his encyclical *Laudatio Si*, condemned the various deformations and distortions the earth, when he says,

> This sister now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her. We have come to see ourselves as her lords and masters, entitled to plunder her at will. The violence present in our heart, wounded by sin, is also reflected in the symptoms of sickness evident in the soil, in water, in air, and in all form of life. this is why the earth herself, burdened and laid waste, is among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor; “she groans in travail” (Rom. 8:22). 40

In Nigeria, for example, constant pollution has contaminated the very air that we breathe. The pollution of our water with toxic waste and industrial chemicals endangers the quality of the lives of the poor, who are undeserving victims of these ecological disasters. A whole constellation of health hazards, from kidney problems to lung cancer are undeniable consequences of the ecological crisis. This crisis has caused unimaginable misery for the less fortunate who have no practical means of coping with the destruction of the environment by the richer, more powerful, and more technologically advanced societies.

1.4.2. Lack of Respect for Human Life

The growing destruction of the earth has launched the world into a social crisis which has resulted in the decline and lack of respect for human life. In view of this fact, Pope Francis stresses,

> In the present condition of global society, where injustice abounds and growing numbers of people are deprived of basic human rights and considered expendable, the

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40 Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’: On Care for our Common Home* (Huntington: Our Sunday Publishing Division, 2015), #2
principle of the common good immediately becomes, logically and inevitably, a summons to solidarity and preferential option for the poorest of our brothers and sisters.\textsuperscript{41} In the modern world, the struggle for wealth and economic advancement at the expense of human life has become the norm. Our mindless avarice has led to the deprivation of basic social amenities for a large percentage of the population and destroyed the dignity of the poor and less privileged members of society. The reduction of the value of the human person is primarily motivated by greed for financial reward at the expense of workers, with no consideration for their welfare and health conditions. In some cases, workers are not paid enough to get by, despite their toils. This means that many poor people have no money to mitigate the environmental hazards to which they are exposed to in order to make a living. In short, the status quo places greater value on economic interest than on actual human beings.

The consequences of the ecological crisis threaten the livelihood of a significant segment of peoples. For this reason, the Society of Jesus, in its work \emph{Healing a Broken World}, stresses that

\begin{quote}
The ecological crisis threatens the livelihood of all people, especially the poor and most vulnerable: they live in increasingly fragile contexts characterized mainly by natural hazards, changing climate condition, pollution, deforestation, desertification and soil exhaustion. Diminishing access to natural resources make livelihood management more difficult; disasters such as flooding, fire or chemical pollution can suddenly push a family into extreme poverty\textsuperscript{42}
\end{quote}

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext{41}Ibid., #158.
\end{footnotes}
The many persons in Nigeria subsisting on agriculture have been denied their livelihood because of conditions beyond their control such as water pollution, soil erosion, flooding and other socio-economic factors. Theirs is a desperate situation, as some have left their homes in search of better social amenities, which has led to the overcrowding of big cities. Even worse, people have been displaced from their homes by war, making them refugees in foreign lands. This situation has led to separation among family members in search of a good and decent life. More often than not, poor families find it very difficult to access good medical facilities, which increases their suffering and contributes to their lower quality of life.

1.4.3. Loss of Biodiversity

In recent years, we have witnessed a massive destruction of our reserve forest and woodlands due to people’s insatiable lust for easy wealth. Much of the forest that protects the environment from climate change has been depleted. It has also opened the environment to gigantic soil erosion. For this reason, Pope Francis laments the alarming loss of biodiversity of plants and wildlife. He stresses, “Each year sees the disappearance of the thousands of plant and animal species which we will never know, which our children will never see, because they have been lost forever.”\(^{43}\) He further argues that the delicate ecological balance is upset by uncontrolled destruction of animals and thousands of plant species or by the reckless exploitation of natural resources. There is a daily rise in deforestation for commercial purposes. Some species of animals and plants can no longer be replaced. The constant felling of trees and rampant pollution of aquifers and

\(^{43}\) Pope Francis, *Laudato Si: On Care for Our Common Home*, #33.
rivers contributes to the problem of air pollution. Ultimately, it will be the future
generations that are deprived of a quality life.

1.4.4. Threat to Our Christian Faith

   It is obvious that through creation God intends to be ever present in the world
with his creatures and that through it, his love may be revealed to them. When God
created the earth, “God saw that all was good” (Gen 1:31). The beauty and awesomeness
of creation helps us to see God’s presence and continues to reveal God’s love to us. As
Pope Francis points out, echoing the Catholic bishops of Canada, “No part of creation is
excluded from this manifestation. From the panoramic vista to the tiniest living form,
nature is a constant source of wonder and awe. It is also a continuing revelation of the
divine.”

   Earth’s ecosystems are arranged so that they harmonize to serve the common
good. The interconnectedness and interrelatedness of everything in creation cannot but
lead to the wonder at the greatness of the maker of creation and to worship of the author
of all things. There is a revelatory presence of God through the wonders of creation.

   In this regard, the Jesuit Task Force on Ecology points out that “the ecological
cries challenge our faith. It is the very dream of God as Creator that is threatened. It is
the entire world, the one God has put in the hands of humankind to keep and preserve,
which is in real danger of destruction.”

   We recognize that God is always present in
creation. The constant abuse, exploitation and destruction of the cosmic system
represents humans’ rebelling, and the injustices perpetuated against the poor and less

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44 Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’: Our Care for our Common Home*, #85.
106(February 2011), #15.
privileged when their rights and means of livelihood are taken away them, is a sin against God, as well as against our fellow humans. This calls us to a conversion of attitudes toward them, and to a realization that in all creatures, God is always present.

1.5 STUDYING THE CHURCH’S TEACHING: SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY, THE COMMON GOOD, SOCIAL SIN, AND SOCIAL REPENTANCE

For the proper formation of the participants in this preparatory stage of the sacrament of reconciliation, it is important for them to have a clear and holistic view of the Catholic social teaching. The church’s social teachings and its basic mission is to protect the sanctity of life and the dignity of each individual person and creature. According to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, there are seven principles of Catholic social teaching, namely: 1) life and dignity of the human person; 2) call to family, community and participation; 3) rights and responsibilities; 4) option for the poor and vulnerable; 5) the dignity of work and the right of workers; 6) Solidarity; and 7) care for God’s creation. While all of these are important for the formation of participants in the sacramental process, I will focus here on two of the principles: the option for the poor, and a commitment to the common good, implicit in the call to family, community, and
participation. I will also dwell briefly on the realities of social sin and the need for social repentance.

1.5.1 Preferential Option for Poor

The mission of Christ is to proclaim liberation for the whole of creation especially the poor and the vulnerable. Christ entrusted to the Church to be a voice for the voiceless and the downtrodden in society. Pope John Paul II, in his encyclical letter *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, states, “By virtue of her own evangelical duty the Church feels called to take her stands beside the poor, to discern the justice of their requests, and to help satisfy them, without losing sight of the good of groups in the context of the common good.” The Church is commissioned to protect the well-being and dignity of all persons, especially the poor and the vulnerable in society, by demanding justice for all people, societies and nations and ensuring a peaceful co-existence of every group in the society. Donal Dorr emphasizes that, “It is a commitment to resist the structural injustice that marks the world….The aim is to bring about a just society.” The participants must clearly understand that it is their responsibility to work on the side of the poor for a just and peaceful society where everyone has the right to the common good of creation. Dorr

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47 I will draw material from *Option for the Poor and for the Earth; Living Justice: Catholic Social Teaching in Action*, and *The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*.


further explain that “An option for the poor is a commitment by individual Christians and Christian communities at every level to engage actively in a struggle to overcome the social injustices that mar our world.” In order for the participants to truly embrace an ecological conversion, it is necessary that they learn to live in solidarity with the poor and vulnerable in the society.

1.5.2 The Common Good

The teaching of the Catholic Church regarding the common good simply states that every individual in the community has a right to the commonwealth of the society no matter their status, whether poor, rich or otherwise. Whatever good belongs to the society should be shared by all and no one should be excluded. Pope John XIII, in *Pacem in Terris*, argues, “that it is in the nature of the common good that every single citizen has the right to share in it – although in different ways, depending on his or her tasks, merits and circumstance. Hence every civil authority must promote the common good in the interest of all, without favoring any individual citizen or category of citizen”

This implies that the wealth of nature belongs to all and everyone has the right to share in it. No one has a legitimate claim to a monopoly of the goods of nature because nature is the free gift of God to all and is to be enjoyed by both individual and community alike. Thus, Francis maintains, “the climate is a common good, belonging to all and

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50 Ibid., #9.
meant for all.”\textsuperscript{52} The earth is a gift of God to everyone and it is for the good of all, those living on the planet now and the generation yet unborn. Hence, the earth was created by God to provide for all and should never be controlled be any single interest, be they a corporation, government or group of individuals, who regard it as their private right.

Sharing the goods of the earth is based on the principles of participation and solidarity. Every individual, by virtue that he or she belongs to that community, has the responsibility to contribute to the economic, political, and social development of all that is committed to the common good, because we are responsible for one another. Whatever affects one, affects all. In the spirit of justice, everyone, including the poor and less privileged, has a right to the common good: good water, a good home, social amenities, good health facilities, and a decent life that is in accordance with basic human dignity. This also implies that the care and protection of the earth is the collective responsibility of all the living since we are all appointed as stewards of creation. We are to be the vanguards of creation, not its pillagers.

1.5.3 Social Sin

According to Pope John Paul II, in his post-synodal apostolic exhortation, \textit{Reconciliatio et Paenitentia}, the term social sin applies “to every sin against justice in interpersonal relationships, committed either by an individual against the community or by the community against the individual.….It is also a sin against the dignity and honor of one’s neighbor or the common good.”\textsuperscript{53} It is a

\textsuperscript{52} Pope Francis, \textit{Laudato Si’: On Care For our Common Home}, (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, 2015), #23.

\textsuperscript{53} Pope John Paul II, \textit{Reconciliatio et Pacenitentia} (Boston, MA: St Paul Edition,1984), 52
sin that holds back a group or community from communing with God. The severity of ecological degradation in our world today shows that ecological sin is committed individually and collectively. Whenever creation is destroyed, it is an insult against the author of creation. It is also a sin against the earth, which provides and sustains human existence. Nonetheless, at the bottom rung are the poor and less privileged who are adversely affected by the injustice meted out by the few powerful people, the so-called developed nations. Therefore, Pope Francis stresses that “to commit a crime against the natural world is a sin against ourselves and a sin against God.”

Kureethadam lends his voice in support of Pope Francis when he writes that: “A way of life that disregards and damages God’s creation, forces the poor into greater poverty, and threatens the right of the future generation to a healthy environment and their fair share of the earth’s wealth and resources, is contrary to the vision of the Gospel.”

When a group of people are denied access to the riches of creation which is meant for the common good and for future generations, it then becomes an intergenerational plunder. Even the destruction of the natural environment is a grave sin, which calls for a change of attitude and forgiveness. Hence, social sin occurs when people commit grave injustice against the poor or the earth.

1.5.4 Social Repentance

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54 Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’: On Care For our Common Home*, (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, 2015), #8.

Social repentance is rooted in an acknowledgement of the wrong committed by the community or institution which has been habituated into a normal way of life. It starts with an awareness of the violation of the intrinsic right and dignity of the individual, community or nations. Social sins are often difficult to perceive. This is why there is need for someone who has gone through the experience to help serve as a sounding board and moral yardstick. The recognition of this social sin demands a social repentance from both the individual and communities involved. In such circumstance, the social sin, with regards to the issue of ecological destruction, is perpetrated by the individual and the community. Therefore, it is essential that they come together as a collective to atone for their sin. Ecological sin involves the destruction of the environment and the different injustices perpetrated against the poor and less privileged. All these invite us to repent and change our attitude in the manner we use God’s gift of creation, which involves all of us. Pope Francis echoes Patriarch Bartholomew by asserting that there is “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.”

Everyone in his or her small or large way has contributed to the destruction of creation and no one can claim innocence. We have all contributed in our different small ways, either as individuals or collectively, to an error of omission or commission to the destruction of creation and the pain inflicted on the poor, who are left to bear the consequences of our social sin. David Coffey explains, “Reconciliation and Penance recognizes that people frequently join together to commit injustice and, draws the

56 Ibid., 8.
conclusion that it is thus only fitting that they should help each other in doing penance so that freed from sin by the grace of Christ they may work with will all women and men of good will for justice and peace in the world.”

It is absolutely necessary that individually and collectively we come together and acknowledge our sins, then make amends for the injustice done to each other and the earth by working for a fair distribution of the common good. This will promote respect for the dignity and well-being of the poor and a peaceful and equitable just human society. What is required is that we all have a change of heart, a metanoia. “We groan, searching for the right action beyond our selfishness or sinfulness; we search in Christ where meaning and power unite.” We are invited to change our attitude and disposition toward creation, act with justice and equity toward the poor and less privileged, and protect the common good of all the living, with a converted heart that turns toward the Earth with love and care.

1.6 EXPERIENCING ECOLOGICAL DEGRADATION FIRST-HAND AND EXPLORING ETHICAL, SPIRITUAL REASONS FOR RESPONDING

The participants must understand that ecological crises are affecting every land and community, and are being caused either by willful action, carelessness, or ignorance. In this section I highlight my personal first-hand experience in Nigeria of water and air pollution, agriculture and deforestation and the danger this ecological crisis poses for the individual and for the common good in Nigeria. These and similar first-hand experiences

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in their own context will be important for participants if they are to understand the seriousness of these crises.

1.6.1 Water Pollution

In the city of Oshogbo, Nigeria, untreated domestic waste is routinely dumped into the canals. The whole environment is polluted with used plastic bottles and domestic waste from residential buildings which are dumped into the water ways. The result is a nightmarish quality of life for the people of Oshogbo. During the raining season, the dumping of domestic waste into the drainage and into the water ways is the norm. In 2015, there was heavy downpour of rain and the waste blocked waterways and canals. As the volume of water had no passage, this led to serious flooding and erosion that claimed many lives, destroyed residential builds and cost millions in commercial damage. Furthermore, Nigeria is presently facing an acute water pollution problem. This pollution is a result of a disastrous waste management system. Much of the country’s industrial areas use inadequate waste management systems and as a result, most of the toxic, chemical and domestic wastes are dumped near residential buildings, beside the public drainage system, and are washed into the rivers. In some cases, they are dumped in the streams which are the main source of drinking water for large percentage of human population and animals. The improper management of toxic and domestic waste pollutes the water with chemical content that makes the water injurious to human health, causing cancer, liver disease, kidney failure, various degrees of bacterial infections, and other health-related issues. A very vivid example is found in Lagos, one of the business capitals
of the country, where only a small percentage of the population has good portable water for domestic use. The rest of the population depends on other sources such as wells, rivers, and streams, which are dry and polluted.

Nigeria is known as one of the major oil-producing nations of the world. The Niger Delta area, which has the largest deposit of oil, is suffering exploitation of its oil and gas resources. The exploitation of crude oil by such huge companies as Shell and Exxon has resulted in oil spillage in the water and in the farmland of the people of the Niger-Delta area. Oil spillage pollutes the water and contaminates the soil, rendering the water unsuitable for drinking by both humans and animals. The pollution also hampers farming and fishing, which is the main economic activity and source of the livelihood of the people of the region. Hence, David Aworawo states that “this inability to fish or farm has led to intense poverty and inability of the people of the Niger delta to meet the most basic of their needs. Portable water sources have been polluted in the course of prospecting for oil and gas.”

1.6.2 Air Pollution

The problem of air pollution is on the increase in most of the country’s urban and rural areas. The issue of gas flaring from the refineries and industrial waste constitutes one of the major sources of terrible air pollution around Nigeria. Most Nigerian households depend on electric generators for electricity for domestic and industrial use, which releases massive amounts of carbon dioxide into our atmosphere. Most towns do

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not have an integrated sewage management system to handle household waste. Many of the residential buildings have no toilet nor do they have individual septic tanks. In some cases, people burn the waste with plastics and car tires which further pollutes the environment.

Another cause for concern is the importation of second-hand cars into the country as means of transportation. Y. Y. Babanyara emphasizes that, “especially in the metropolitan areas, inefficient energy combustion in the transportation system generated high levels of localized air pollution.”62 These second-hand cars have high emission rates which release high levels of carbon dioxide into the environment and cause air pollution. In the recent past, the government allowed for the use of single-engine motorcycles popular known in Nigeria as Okada as a means of transporting goods and passengers in both the urban and rural areas, which has also increased the level of air pollution in the country. Today air pollution constitutes a serious health hazard to the lives of the people.

1.6.3 Agriculture and Deforestation

In Nigeria, a large percentage of the population earn their livelihood from small-scale farming. In order to realize a good harvest from their crops, they rely on crop rotation. In the clearing of the farmlands, the farmer gathers the dry grasses and burns them, which causes air pollution and the destruction of nitrite topsoil. Furthermore, the cutting down of trees has multiple effects on the environment. Babanyara points out that, “Deforestation is a process whereby trees are felled for several purposes, but without replanting them. The continuous removal or destruction of significant areas of forest

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cover results in a highly degraded environment with attendant reduction in biodiversity. It also causes soil erosion and in marginal lands, can lead to desertification.63

There are several reasons why Nigerians engage in the felling of trees. Some cut trees for commercial purposes in order to earn a livelihood for their family. Many that are cut down are never replaced because people do not understand the importance of having trees in the environment. Roots and leaves which are useful in the production of herbals and chemical medication for human health, are lost in the process. Trees nourish the soil and contribute to climate stability. When they are felled, there is serious soil erosion and a high temperature. This in turn affects food security because the soil erosion makes it difficult or impossible to farm. Human needs for food security, health, and shelter, especially for the poor and less privileged in the society is seriously jeopardized.

1.6.4 Ethical And Spiritual Reason For A Human Response

Moral Response. A closer look at the problem of the ecological crises shows that while we lack a total and permanent solution to these crises, we must mitigate the situation as best we can, bringing about a gradual reduction of its impact and fostering a new lifestyle. There is a need to cultivate a change of attitude on how we use and treat the gifts of creation. This calls for an introspection on our part into the root causes of the problem of the ecological crisis. Pope John Paul II categorized the ecological crisis as a moral crisis when he wrote, “Rather, we must go to the source of the problem and face in its entirety that profound moral crisis of which the destruction of the environment is only one

troubling aspect.” It is important for everyone to confront this evil that threatens the environment and endangers our co-existence, which is in large measure driven by unchecked greed and selfishness to create wealth, but at the expense of human life. Leonardo Boff, in his book *Ecology and Poverty*, states, “The whole of the earth has been reduced to natural capital, an accumulation of resources for growth and profit.” The human desire for quick wealth on one hand, and on the other hand, acting in ignorance or negligence without weighing the consequences and negative impact on human life, is causing ecological crises that call for a change of attitude.

Larry Mick contends that “... much of the devastation is the result of an attitude that the land and all of non-human creation is there for the taking. Natural resources are exploited for human profit, regardless of the consequences for the future.” This attitude will result in our extinction if we do not change. The abuse and exploitation of creation will always negatively impact the poor and the less privileged in our society. This is why Pope Francis calls for the ecological conversion on the part of everyone, rich and poor people alike. The change must come from within, and everyone must be willing to make compromises for the sake of ourselves and the future generation. We must cut down our consumption, reduce waste, and be ready to share with others for the common good. Francis stresses that we are called to “Replace consumption with sacrifice, greed with

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generosity, wastefulness with a spirit of sharing asceticism which entails learning to give, and not simply give up. It is a way of loving, moving gradually away from what I want to what God’s world needs. It is liberation from fear, greed and compulsion.  

We must develop a positive attitude of sharing with other people. We are expected to act from the pure intention of seeking to love and care for the good of others. It is only through these means that we can end this crisis.

*Spiritual Response.* The world made by God is first and foremost created to reveal his beauty and love. The biblical account of creation expresses God’s satisfaction in his creation: “And God saw that all was very good” (Gen 1:31). The world that God created is a reflection of His love and beauty. Denis Edwards, echoing the view of Bonaventure, states, “God creates the perceptible world as a means of self-revelation. Each creature represents the divine wisdom. Each is a work of art produced by Wisdom.” Each creature is a reflection of God and a sacred place because God is found in and they must be treated with love, care, and respect. Joshtrom Kureethadam stresses that the world must not be perceived as mere surrounding environment. Rather, “The world is above all God’s marvelous handiwork. It is creation. It is the result of God’s free creative act, an outpouring of God’s self-giving and self-revealing love.

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As such creation has an intrinsic goodness, beauty, and integrity independent of human perception and utility.\textsuperscript{69}

Humans must see creation as a means of expressing God’s love, ‘for God has no other purpose for creating than for his love and goodness.’\textsuperscript{70} It is the prefect fulfilment of God’s creative power, which is revealed in his ability to bring something out of nothing, “God created freely out of nothing.”\textsuperscript{71} Creation helps us to be in communion with God the Maker and Creator of all things when we use the gifts or fruits of creation to worship and praise him. In creation, God is ever visibly present as a sacrament of his love. In other words, humans are invited into loving union with God through his creation by caring, loving, and protecting it, seeing it as an act of God’s abiding presence and not as raw material for selfish and greedy purposes. Kureethadam further explains that “the degradation of our home is a destruction of God’s creation and constitutes nothing less than disrespect toward the Creator.”\textsuperscript{72} All the abuses or exploitation of creation that result in the ecological crisis, be it air or water pollution, deforestation, or the destruction of animal and plant species, which reduces the quality of human life and its dignity, are a sin against God from which humans are called to conversion.

1.7. PRAYER TO CONCLUDE THE PREPARATORY PROCESS

For the participants, this is the final event of the preparatory period, which is the first stage of the sacramental rite of reconciliation. In anticipation of the


\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., #296.

celebration of the actual sacrament of reconciliation, the participants prepare themselves prayerfully with the help of the creative Spirit of life and are united with the whole of creation. They enter into a new reality in their relationship with God and all other creatures in the process of ecological conversion.

1.7.1 Prayer

*Invocation of the Creative Spirit of Life.* At this point, the participants gather in an open space where they can encounter and really feel their connectedness and interdependence with nature. In a deep silent moment, they allow nature to speak to them and listen to nature’s elements such as the water of streams, the green leaves, the sun, air, mountains, birds, and so forth, and realize that it is only their misapprehension that separates them from nature. They sing a hymn to the Holy Spirit who dwells in the whole creation and unites them together to experience the presence of God in creation. In doing so, the whole creation can experience the indwelling of the creative Spirit of life. As Edwards points out:

> The Spirit assists and enables the birth of the new: For we know that the entire creation has been groaning together in the pangs of childbirth up till now (Rom 8:22). this suggests that the Spirit can be understood not only as the companion of creation in its travail but also the midwife to the birth of the new creation. It is always the life-giving Spirit of God who enables the new to be born. In this sense the Spirit is only midwife but also the one who empowers the process from within.

> It is evident that we cannot achieve any ecological conversion on the strength of human effort alone. We must invoke the Spirit who knows the groans and the pangs of

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73 In Nigeria, many parishes have such open spaces as part of the church property.
creation and can empower humans to work for the birth of a new creation. It is the Holy Spirit that will recreate in us new grace who will bring about the ecological conversion. The Spirit supports our human determination for change, empowers us to decrease our consumption and waste, and to see the poor and less privileged in the society as equals and who deserve to be respected and have a good quality of life. The Spirit bring new life and connects the whole of creation together.

*General Intercessory Prayer.* Some of the participants may be selected to lead the community in prayers of intercessions. These prayers will focus on various aspects of the ecological crisis that have been key to their learning and discernment. The purpose of the prayer is not to apportion blame to anyone but rather to invite people to seek the grace of God for a change. Mick emphasizes that: “Petitions must be composed as true prayers in which the assembly can join.” Hence participants may be invited to compose the petitions out of their own personal experience of the ecological crisis, emphasizing the importance of creation, the abuse and harm inflicted on the earth, the various injustices the poor, and the need to seek God’s help to resolve these issues.

*Concluding prayer for the Earth.* As a way of conclusion, everyone in the community might pray together with one voice this prayer or one similar to this:

> All powerful God, you are present in the whole universe and in the smallest of your creatures. You embrace with your tenderness all that exists. Pour out upon us the power of your love, that we may protect life and beauty.

This prayer allows the whole human community to reaffirm the sovereignty of God over creation. With this prayer, the participants sum up the sacramental journey so far, and

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76 Pope Francis, *Laudato Si: On Care of Our Common Home*, #246.
enter into a commitment to protect, care, respect, and love the earth as faithful stewards of creation. They will henceforth work together to protect the common good and the livelihood and dignity of all people.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has described a possible first stage of a three-fold sacramental process of Reconciliation that might serve communities in various parts of the world. It has highlighted many different dimensions of the ecological crisis in light of Pope Francis’ encyclical on Care of God’s Creation, *Laudato Si’*. In order to explore how to open the minds of potential participants to the actualities of the situation, I have offered a brief exploration of my own first-hand experience in Nigeria, recognizing that abuse and exploitation of nature occurs daily in every community. This preparatory process emphasizes the collective and individual dimensions of the destruction, describing it as both moral and social sin. It also invites greater consciousness of the immediate dangers of the ecological destruction if urgent steps are not taken, as it could lead to the total extinction of the human race.

In order to safeguard the environment from further destruction, there is need for a realignment of ethical and moral values, a change of attitude, and a deeper ecological consciousness of the ways humans use the God’s gift creation. In this first stage of the sacramental journey, it is my hope to help participants make a true evaluation of their conscience concerning their relationship with Creation, in order to prepare for participation in sacramental reconciliation, which is to be the focus of the next chapter of this thesis.
Chapter Two:
RITE OF RECONCILIATION AS EXPRESSION OF ECOLOGICAL CONVERSION

Celebrating the Rite of Reconciliation is the heart of the sacramental process we are exploring in this thesis. After the careful and expansive preparation described in the last chapter, we move now to the sacramental rite itself. Of the sacramental options given, Rite II is the most appropriate one for the ecological conversion we hope will be affected in participants, since this form underscores the communal nature of both sin and God’s reconciling grace.

Ecological conversion is a collaborative process, as Pope Francis writes in *Laudato Si’*. In celebrating it sacramentally, it is important to engage all the participants as fully as possible. At the same time, it is a process through which the individual penitent is confronted with his or her contribution to the reality of ecological destruction, deforestation, pollution, and the destruction of biodiversity. “These are sin against ourselves and sin against God”77 which humanity must acknowledge and together to find a way back into a close union, marked by the triple dimensions of ecological reconciliation: with God, with humans, and with creation. Thus, Pope Francis affirms, “we come to realize that a healthy relationship with creation is one dimension of overall personal conversion, which entails the recognition of our errors, sins, faults, failures, and leads to heartfelt repentance and desire for change.”78 Individuals come to understand the implication of ecological degradation and injustice to the poor, and to explore their own

77 Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’: On Care for our Common Home* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor Publication Division, 2015), #8.
78 Ibid., #218.
motives, which have led to sin against God and serious crimes against the Earth, which is metaphorically described as the body of Christ.\textsuperscript{79} In responding to the urgent call to a change of heart or \textit{metanoia}, participants are looking toward not only a current renewal of the Earth but also to the restoration of a new Creation, as described at the end of the book of Revelation (Rev. 22), and the hope for an eschatological fullness in God.

In what follows I will explore how all the elements of the rite of reconciliation – prayer, songs, scripture reading, examination of conscience, and a common penance – can bring about a strong and evocative experience that facilitates ecological conversion. Throughout this chapter I will underscore the importance of the communal nature of the rite, the communal nature of violence against the earth, the acknowledgement of the various faces of social and personal sinfulness, and the need to accept a communal commitment to the healing of the planetary community.

2.1 WORSHIP ENVIRONMENT

Bearing in mind that human persons engage in ritual through body, mind, and spirit, planning for the rite of Reconciliation needs to assume that the worship environment will have a great impact on the experience of the individual penitent. Thus, careful consideration must be given to the time and place of the celebration. The worship environment must reecho human connectedness with nature and bring to consciousness that inseparable bond. Lawrence Mick states, “our heightened ecological awareness reminds us that the human person is constantly affected by a multiplicity of factors in the environment. Good worship requires paying attention to the various factors and fostering

\textsuperscript{79} Sallie McFague, \textit{A New Climate for Theology, God, the World, and Global Warming} (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2008), 75.
an environment conducive for prayer and celebration.”

Hence, the season and the place of the celebration of the rite can open the penitent’s heart to accepting ecological conversion.

2.1.1 Time of Celebration

The mercy of God is timeless; thus, God’s mercy is open to be received at any time, every day, any season of the year. However, the church organizes her liturgy so that it might focus on a particular aspect of the mystery of Christ’s redemptive action. In order that an ecological rite of the sacrament of reconciliation be celebrated in a way that will be meaningful and rewarding for the penitents, especially in places like my own country of Nigeria, I suggest that it should be celebrated during the period of harvest which is the period between the months of August to December. At this time in Nigeria, the rainy season is winding down and farmers are harvesting their corps, counting their gains and their losses. It makes sense for the penitents to examine their activities during the year and ask in what small measure they have contributed to the destruction of creation for their selfish and greedy purposes. They examine ways in which they have perpetrated injustice toward their workers and neighbors. At the same time, harvest is a period to start anew, as they thank God for the gifts of creation and a bountiful harvest.

2.1.2 Place of Celebration

The worship environment should help create an ecological awareness that can motivate a spirit of conversion in the heart of the penitents, as they are surrounded by living aspects of nature. Mick affirms that “we can enhance the experience of worship by

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bringing signs of nature into the sanctuary: placing greening/flowering plants or trees in the church, giving people seeds or seedlings to plant, decorating the sanctuary with natural art, opening the sanctuary to natural light through windows and skylights, and worshipping outside.”

As Mick suggests, the space and venue needs to be properly considered. I propose that while an outdoor venue might be used, the ecological sacrament of reconciliation might best be celebrated in the church. The church should be decorated with flowers, branches, and in harvest season, with the fruits of the harvest. The colors used to decorate the church should be bright in order to bring the penitents close to the natural world. In this way, the penitent comes face to face with nature whom they have wounded by their action so as to resolve to reconcile with God, each other and creation.

2.2 HYMNS AND PSALMS

Hymns and psalms are central to the celebration because they enable an embodied response to the call to conversion. Many psalms and hymns focus on the goodness of God’s Creation, while others focus on the groaning of Creation; still others show how God through Christ reconciles the whole of creation to Godself. Psalms can enable a community to express lament in recognizing sin and failure. Moreover, singing engages the whole person in these awarenesses and enables participants to sing their response to the call to repentance.

2.2.1 Hymns and Songs

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Hymns and songs can motivate *metanoia* or conversion because they speak directly to the heart of the penitents and enable the entire community gathered together to seek for forgiveness, mercy, pardon, healing and restoration of the ways humans have treated the natural world, which is God’s precious gift. Through songs, hearts can be moved with contrition and invited to seek for mercy and pardon from God, and to mend our relationship with one another, especially our most vulnerable sisters and brothers, and the entire creation.

*Invoking the Presence of God in Creation.* The opening song of the rite might well be a song of praise for God’s Creation, since, as Randy Stice explains, “the entrance hymn manifests the presence of God, for God, the giver of songs is present whenever his people sing his praises.”82 The opening hymn is a call to God to visit his creatures who are gathered to sing, to worship and adore his majesty as the Source and giver of all things, and to seek God’s forgiveness. Norman Habel notes that “when we commence worship by invoking the presence of the Creator God in God’s entire sanctuary of Earth… we call on God through his Holy Spirit to come and dwell among his creation who are gathered together to praise, adore, glorify and worship his majesty for the gift and wonder of creation.”83 This practice of opening liturgy with a praise of God in Creation reaches back to the early Church, who gathered on the first day of the week, the day of resurrection, to worship God within the assembly and with the whole of creation for the redemption of the world through Jesus Christ our Lord. Mick further explains that


“the liturgy constantly leads us to offer thanks and praise for the gifts of creation and redemption.”

With the opening song, the whole creation comes together the sun, the moon, the stars, the rivers, the seas, the tress, the mountains, the valleys, the birds, and everything in Creation to give fitting worship and adoration to the maker of all that exists, living and non-living being.

*Invitation to Worship.* Hymns used for the sacrament of reconciliation can be an invitation for the whole of creation to worship God, and to set the hearts of the participants on the gift God has bestowed on the world in its human and non-human creatures. When an assembly gathers together to contemplate God in the beauty of his creation, song draws their heart to sing the praise and greatness of our God. Pope Francis emphasizes, “our hearts are moved to praise the Lord for all his creatures and to worship him in union with them.”

For this reason, St Paul admonished the Church in Colossae, “to sing together psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs.” In songs, God calls the penitents and creation to sing praises and give thanks to the God of all goodness for his beautiful gifts of love manifested in all creatures, and to prepare the penitents for the mercy and pardon they are about to receive. In this way, they not only praise God for creation, they also worship God with creation, and recognize the nearness of creatures whom they may have not served well. Evoking this sense that the whole of creation stands together in unity, in one voice and heart, to worship the living and true God anticipates the

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86 Colossian 3:16
reconciliation desired in this sacrament. Already, the moon, the stars, the sun, the fish, the sea, the rocks, mountains, and valleys come together in communion with human beings to give glory and praise to the living God, the creator of all things and the one who sustains everything for all eternity. Pope Francis summarizes this in the prayer he offers at the conclusion of *Laudato Si’*, “Father, we praise you with all your creatures. They came forth from your all-powerful hand; they are yours, filled with your presence and your tender love. Praise be to you.”

*Hymns that seek mercy.* Songs used throughout the rite can also express the common intention of the penitents, who with the whole creation are gathered together to seek mercy, forgiveness, and pardon. Through song, the penitents and the whole community of creation plead to God for mercy and pardon for the evil committed against God and the whole Earth, which is our common home. Like the story of the prodigal son, the penitents join in song to ask forgiveness for the sins of abuse, exploitation, and the plundering of God’s gift of creation. They approach God for mercy and pardon for the many injustices committed against the poor and the less privileged in the society. They come together as individual penitents and as a whole community to admit their failure to protect and care for all God’s creation. Through songs, they express their guilt and offenses against God’s love in creation and the poor. In sum, Habel affirms that songs can address

... our human alienation from the rest of God’s creation and our consequent misuse of God’s creation. God is restoring us to our relationship to Earth by broadening our worship experience to encompass all that God loves and by connecting us to all that

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88 Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’: Our Care for our Common Home* (Huntington: Our Sunday Publishing Division, 2015), 159.
Christ seeks to redeem and reconcile, by the life-giving power of the Holy Spirit.89

2.2.2 Psalms

The Psalms used in reconciliation can express various human desires and the longing of the heart to praise, to worship, to acknowledge sin, and to lament and seek forgiveness from God and Creation. While psalms of praise that acknowledge God’s, beautiful Creation can certainly be used, the urgent cries of the Earth heard throughout this sacramental process are a unique call to communities to engage in lament. Mary McGann encourages communities “to embrace the more difficult modalities of prayer, lament, acknowledgement of sin, and repentance.”90 Many psalms and other scriptural passages express lamentation for the Earth, for the personal and social sin of the community, and call to God for help. “Have mercy on me, God, in accord with your merciful love; in your abundant compassion blot out my transgressions” (Ps.51:1). “In you, Lord, I have taken refuge: let me never be put to shame; in your righteousness deliver me” (31:2). These psalms enable a community to express a yearning for a change of attitude, a call for God’s grace and help, and an expression of a willingness to be converted to a new way of life.

2.3 READING OF THE WORD OF GOD

In order to facilitate the process of ecological conversion through the actual celebration of the Rite of the Reconciliation, penitents listen to the Word of God which can have a transformative power to brings about a metanoia in the life and heart of those


who hear it. The Introduction to the Rite of Reconciliation emphasizes that through the hearing of the God’s Word, God calls people to repentance and leads them to a true conversion of heart.\footnote{Pope Paul VI, \textit{The Rites of the Catholic Church} (New York: Pueblo Publishing Co, 1976), 353.} Through the reading of the Word of God, God speaks directly to the human conscience. As Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator affirms, the conscience is human’s most secret core, and his/her sanctuary. There, they are alone with God whose voice echoes in his/her depths.\footnote{Agnonkhianmeghe E. Orobator, ed. \textit{Reconciliation, Justice, and Peace: The Second African Synod} (New York: Orbis Books, 2011), 52.} The word of God can open the heart of the penitents to a “profound interior conversion,”\footnote{Pope Francis, \textit{Laudato Si’}: Our Care for our Common Home, #2.} so that their daily encounter with Christ in his word will affect their relationship with other creatures and everything around them. The hearing of the word of God helps the participants confront their sin against the rest of creation and be reconciled with God, humans and creation. This process will be continued when they examine their consciences concerning their relationship with the poor and their contribution to the destruction of the world.

St Paul emphasizes that the scripture is an instrument of change. He affirms that “All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching the truth, rebuking error, correcting faults, and giving instruction for right living” (2Tim 3:16). Hence, the scripture reading in the rite of Reconciliation helps the penitents to probe their consciences and instructs them on ways to facilitate a right relationship with creation

2.3.1 The Old Testament Reading

Old Testament readings focus on the goodness of God’s Creation. Appropriate for use would be the story of creation (Genesis1:1-28); God’s wonderful creation as good
(Genesis 1; 2:4-7); God’s instruction to humans to tend creation (Genesis 2:15); God’s covenant with Noah and all creation (Genesis 9:8-17); and the hymn of all creation to the almighty creator (Daniel 3:52-90). All these readings focus on God as the Creator and Source of Creation, as well as humanity’s responsibility to tend God’s garden with humility and faithfulness. God is ever-present in creation and his power sustains all things. Everything in creation continues to give praise and thanks to God for his infinite love expressed in the beautiful and wonderful creation. The Prophets in the Old Testament, who lament the abuses and echo the cries of the earth and the poor, are likewise good selections for this rite. Jeremiah laments, for example,

Day and night my tears never stop,  
for my people are struck,  
my daughter crushed by a savage blow  
I see the dead slain in the fields  
and people starving on city streets….  
We have sinned against you  
and we know it, God;  
we share our people’s guilt. (Jeremiah 14:17-21)\(^{94}\)

The Prophet Jeremiah, like many of the prophets in the Hebrew scriptures, denounces the destruction of Creation and the abuse of God’s people. Today this word addresses the cries of the hungry, the destruction of the ozone layer, the air and water pollution, the deforestation of the reserves resulting in erosion, all of which cause a migration of people to crowded urban settings. These situations, in so far as they are humanly caused, are crimes against the earth and her vulnerable people which is also an affront to God, who is the Creator of all things and who now calls for conversion and reconciliation.

### 2.3.2 The New Testament Reading

\(^{94}\) Translation taken from the International Commission on English in the Liturgy.
New Testament readings might focus on either the groaning of creation or the God who reconciles all things in himself.

*The Groaning of Creation.* Paul teaches that “From the beginning till now, the entire Creation, as we know, has been groaning in one great act of giving birth,” waiting for its redemption (Rom 8:18-25). Today this image of creation groaning can remind penitents of the pain and grief experienced by the natural world because of the destruction and abuse committed against it by the human community. These crimes against creation are rooted in human sinfulness, carelessness and alienation from the Earth, our home. The effect is what we witness in the ecological destruction that has brought about polluted water sources, the extinction of animal and plants species, and toxic soil. The consequences of these destructions are, in turn, experienced in all the areas of human life. We reap the fruits of our own sins because our existence depends solely on creation.

Pope Francis explains, “The violence present in our hearts, wounded by sin, is reflected in the symptoms of sickness evident in the soil, water, in the air and in all forms of life. That is why the earth herself, burdened and laid waste, is among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor; ‘she groans in travail’.” As Paul states in Romans, human beings and all creatures are together waiting for freedom and regeneration – to be set free from the slavery of sin and death. In Paul’s imagery, the groaning of creation is not a complete destruction, but rather creation will be set free by God to reach its perfection. Hence, Habel emphasizes that Paul is signaling that creation

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is an active participant in God’s plan for redemption and restoration. Earth is waiting for the revelation of the children of God who will live together in justice and who will care for Earth.\footnote{Norman Habel, \textit{A Theology of Liturgy in a New Key: Worshiping with Creation, The Season of Creation:} A Preaching Commentary, Minneapolis: Fortress, (2011) 20.}

\textit{God Reconciles All Things.} Although the world we live in today is constantly experiencing human hostility, which is leading it to significant disintegration – violence, war, suffering, and distortion of the ecosystems – Paul teaches that it is the intention of God to reconcile not only humans but everything in creation and restore peace in the order of nature. It is God’s intention, writes Paul, that in Christ, “God will reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood shed on the cross” (Col 1:20). Christ entered the cosmos and dwelt on the earth to restore the broken relationship between God and humanity, as well as among humans and the whole creation. For this reason, Denis Edwards, explains that in the Word made flesh, God embraces the whole finite creaturely existence from within. The incarnation is God-with-us in the very tissue of our biological existence and in the systems of the natural world.\footnote{Denis Edwards, \textit{Partaking of God: Trinity, Evolution and Ecology} (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2014), 59.} God took our human nature in Christ and binds himself to creation in order to be present with us in our suffering and pain due to greed, selfishness, and ignorance; indeed, he brought everything in creation together by his cross. “Christ himself is our peace” (Eph. 2: 14-16). “All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation” writes St Paul (2 Cor. 5:18).
Paul emphasizes that the mission of reconciliation has been entrusted to all human beings as stewards of creation. Ilia Delio states that we are given the duty to care for Creation, which does not belong to us. The Earth is the Lord’s and we must steward it on God’s behalf.\textsuperscript{98} It is our responsibility to work with Christ as faithful stewards of Creation: to increase harmony within the web of life; and to restore the integrity of creation, justice among humans, and to cooperate with God for “the restoration of a new creation” (Rev. 21:1-5).

2.3.3 The Gospel Reading

The gospels focus on the life of Christ and highlight many aspects of his relationship with the natural world as well as his love and service of the poor. These are important themes to be underscored in the selection of the Gospel used in the reconciliation service.

The Synoptic Gospels offer many examples from the life and ministry of Jesus Christ in which he showed authority over nature and in which he demonstrated that he understands and is deeply connected with the functioning of the order of nature. He showed over and again that he came bring healing to the poor and wounded, many of whom suffered as a result of the destruction of the created world and/or the arrogance of human greed. He praised the beauty of the lilies and called for patience in working to heal the barren fig tree. He referred to himself as the great vine, and to his followers as his branches. Indeed, Christ entered into the web of life to restore normalcy to the ecosystem already disrupted because of human selfishness and greed. The Bible teaches

that Jesus Christ, the healer of Creation, came in human flesh to change disordered nature: “The Word of God became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (Jn 1:14). God in Jesus Christ is the “source, spring, and power” to heal the whole of creation. Thus, it is believed that the salvation and redemption of Jesus Christ is for the whole of creation, not for human being alone. The suffering, death, and resurrection of Christ was meant to save and heal the disrupted world wounded by sin and restore the new reign of peace, goodness, and joy that creation can worship together in unity. Hence, he commissioned his disciples to work for the unity and harmony of all people, and for healing and redemption of the whole creation (Mk 16:15).

Jesus Christ exercised his authority over the order of nature when he calms the storm on the sea, “Even the wind and waves obey him” (Mt 8:23-27, Mk 4:35-41). He restored healing to the sick by using natural elements such as spittle and clay in the healing of the blind man (Mk 7:33, Jn. 9:3). He fed the crowd with the fruits of the earth in the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves because he is compassionate to the poor (Mt. 14:13-21, Jn. 6:1-14). Christ taught the crowd using parables that spoke about natural processes: for example, the parable of the sower (Mk. 4:3-8), parable of the fig tree (Mk. 13:28-31), the parable of the mustard seed (Mk. 4:30-32). The mission of Christ is to save and heal the whole of creation. Hence, James Nash concludes, “the divine ministry is a mission of love, for it is love to create, sustain and save all people and all creation…The divine ministry offers physical sustenance for all, comforts the afflicted, promises redemption, generates meaning, builds communion, pursues peace, reconciles

99 Sallie McFague, A New Climate for Theology: God, the World, and Global Warming (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 79.
100 Ibid., 78.
the alienated, liberates the oppressed, challenges the oppressors, demands the right, and rights the wrong.”

2.4 HOMILY

The homily is a means by which God speaks to the heart of the penitents in order to evoke “a conversion of the heart” – *a metanoia* that marks the beginning of the penitent’s return to God like the prodigal son. The homily must reflect on the readings used in the celebration and must lead the penitent into a search of his or her conscience. In what follows, I spell out many themes that might be part of the homily, but these need to be carefully selected by the homilist and adapted to the lives of the participants. The goal is to touch their hearts in such a way that it can elicit a new way of life.

2.4.1 The Earth as a Sacrament

The homily can emphasize the importance of the earth as a sacrament and sanctuary where we encounter God. In view of this fact, MaFague argues, “we are at home here on earth, an earth that exists within God…We live within God before we are born, during our time on earth, and after we die. We are always in the same place within God.” This implies that the earth can be thought of metaphorically as the body of God, as sacred; and we must love and respect it because of this. Everything in creation is sacramental; it manifests the greatness and the wisdom of its maker. God acts in and through the earth to give existence and sustenance to every creature. Pope Francis affirms that every creature reflects in its own distinct way “a ray of God’s infinite wisdom and

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goodness. [Humans] must therefore respect the particular goodness of every creature, to avoid any disordered use of things".\textsuperscript{104} The moon, stars, water, mountains, hills, valleys, plants, animals, and everything all join in revealing the glory of God.

God is always and everywhere present in his creation. Any harm by individuals or communities is a grave sin against God, whether through pollution of water and air, the destruction of the ozone layer, emissions which result in climate change, the destruction of the soil with toxic waste, deforestation which leads to massive erosion and migration, the denial the people of their right to the common good, which in turn can lead to war, violence and the destruction of life and property of the people. The homily helps the penitents into an examination of conscience, in which an awareness of their carelessness and abuse of nature’s gift now calls them to a conversion of heart and reconciliation.

2.4.2 Interconnectedness in Nature.

Another important theme the homily might stress is the interconnectedness and interrelatedness of everything in nature. In this regard, Pope Francis reminds us that “everything is interconnected and that genuine care for our own lives and our relationship with nature is inseparable from the fraternity of justice, and faithfulness to others.”\textsuperscript{105} This means that we are all bonded together in the same web of life. Human beings cannot survive without air, water or food. Everything is in the circle of life. In other words, “whatever we do can disturb the cosmos.”\textsuperscript{106} It is our common duty to promote healthy

\textsuperscript{104} Pope Francis, \textit{Laudato Si’: On Care for our Common Home}, (Huntington: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, 2015), #69
\textsuperscript{105} Ibid., #70.
living among all human beings and to respect the integrity of creation. The preacher must impress on the penitents the importance of the integrity of creation and call them to foster the harmony within nature and among all creatures who share our common home. It is our responsibility to care for, love and respect creation, as stewards of Creation; to care for the good and well-being of all, recognizing that human beings are not above creation, in a mode of domination, but a part of the web of life. We need one another; we have a shared responsibility for each other and the world. In the words of Orobator, being good and decent are worth it.\textsuperscript{107} We exist in a communion of life with God, with one another and the rest of creation. The penitents must be invited to take up again their obligations: “the environment is God’s gift to everyone, and in our use of it we have a responsibility towards the poor, towards the future generations and towards humanity as a whole creation.”\textsuperscript{108}

2.4.3 Acknowledgement of Degradation on the Environment

It is important that the homily reflect on the evil of the ecological destruction taking place around the world, but more specifically in the place where the community lives. This might include the sins against creation by which humans destroy the biodiversity of God’s creation; the degradation of earth's soils and waters; actions that cause changes in its climate; stripping earth of its natural resources or destroying its

\textsuperscript{107} Ibid., 229.

wetlands. These are grave sins against God and serious crimes against creation and against ourselves.

The homily can highlight the motives that might be at work in ecological destruction of various kinds: a desire to have more, attitudes of wastefulness or selfishness, and at times ignorance of how human action affects the surrounding ecosystem. It can dwell more fully on the destruction within the place where this particular community dwells: for example, in my setting, the burning of tire, the dumping of domestic wastes on the street or in streams or rivers, which in turn contributes to water and air pollution, and sometimes leads to floods, erosions, and other disasters. These actions also cause health hazards to the community. The felling of trees for economic purposes and domestic use leads to the deforestation of the reserves, a loss of biodiversity, and the destruction of the ecosystem. At the same time, the homilist can point out that the ecological damage surrounding a community might come from the abuse of others beyond the community: for example, the spillage of oil that results from oil extraction by multi-national corporations, who are plentiful in Nigeria, destroys the environment and takes away the livelihood of the local community, bringing many to experience abject poverty, and creating risks to the life of the community as a whole. These abuses call for courageous witness on the part of the faith community to make evident to their government and to the corporations themselves that there is moral abuse taking place that needs change and reconciliation.

Finally, the homily must emphasize the salvific role of Christ: his incarnation, death, and resurrection, which can bring about healing and restoration of the whole Creation, and effect deep *metanoia* and heart-felt change in the lives of the penitents. The homily must outline the community’s mission – in the words of Pope Francis, their “vocation” – to protect and care for creation as individuals, the Christian community, and the entire human race in order to preserve it not only for the living but also the future generation yet unborn. The homily must lead the penitents into a process of conversion that will end in reconciliation, and a future experience of the “a new Heaven and a new earth” (Rev. 21:1)

### 2.5 Examination of Conscience

We have just discussed how the homily can stress the importance of creation as a sacrament of God and as God’s sanctuary, the interconnectedness and interrelatedness of every creature; and the various abuses, exploitation, and plundering of creation around the world and in our own particular environment. It should also stress the salvific mission of Christ to heal and redeem Creation, and our mission as individuals and Christian community to heal and foster the integrity of the natural world for present and future generations. Since this ecological rite of reconciliation is meant to facilitate conversion, a change of lifestyle, and to restore healing to the human-earth relationship, we highlight now how the process of the examination of conscience helps to realize this purpose.

In order to achieve a change of lifestyle, it is necessary for each penitent and community to engage in a soul-searching process that will ultimately bring about a true

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transformation of life. Delio affirms that “Before we can transform our lives [into an experience of kinship with Creation], we must look honestly at our lifestyles and see clearly how God is calling us to change.” The examination of conscience opens our minds and hearts to the different ways we have plundered the earth and enables us to ask forgiveness from creation, and God’s forgiveness for our transgressions. By so doing, we can make amends for our past sin and repair the damages we caused ourselves, creation and God. The following pattern may be adapted within the larger framework of our Christian commitment for the care of creation. The priest or minister may lead the penitents and the whole assembly in these or similar words. The rite of the examination of conscience used here was adapted from Delio, *Care for Creation: a Franciscan Spirituality of the Earth.*

1. How well do I thank God for his generous gift of creation, the moon, sun, stars, seas, rivers, mountains, hills, valleys, birds, animals, skies, and everything in creation which shows God’s gracious and generous love?

2. How well do I recognize God’s infinite love revealed in the diversity of his loving Creation? Do I allow each creature to bring me into a deep appreciation of his gratuitous love? How well do I answer generously God’s invitation to develop a tie of love, care, concern, and companionship with all other living and non-living beings?

3. Is my whole life centered on God’s love, revealed through Jesus in all of creation? Do I respond wholeheartedly to the call of the Spirit in my life, especially the Spirit’s call to change?

4. Do I recognize God’s creation as a loving gift to everyone that must not to be used for selfish and greedy purposes? Do I respect and uphold the common good,

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and give priority in my life to those who are most endangered, suffering, and poor?

5. How am I contributing to ecological destruction, through such actions as an improper waste of food and water? Do I beg God for healing and reconciliation for the stained relationship I have with God’s Creation?

6. How have I contributed to the pollution of our towns and cities, air and water, through my negligence, disregard, or sense of alienation from the environment?

7. How caring am I towards the extended community of Creation? Do I really show mutual respect, humility, faithfulness, and love for mother Earth, for brother and sister species, for water, air, and soil?

8. Have I consumed more than I need for my sustenance, and in so doing denied other people their rightful due, and contributed to the culture of waste?

9. Do I commit myself today to work toward protecting God’s creation and encouraging other people to experience ecological conversion? Do I help and encourage other people to care and serve creation as faithful stewards of creation?

   Careful meditation on these questions will lead the penitents and the whole assembly into a truthful and fruitful examination of conscience. It will help the penitents make a proper assessment of how well they have lived in harmony and care of creation. The examination of conscience should ignite a sense of responsibility and commitment to go into the future with a strong determination to engage in the healing of creation. Pope Francis spells out some practical ways this can be done; he encourages people “to respect creation by avoiding the use of plastic and paper, reducing water consumption, separating refuse, cooking only what can reasonably been consumed, showing care for other living beings, using public transport or car-pooling, planting trees, turning off unnecessary lights, or any number of other practices.”113 With the help of the Holy Spirit, they receive strength and grace to live in one accord with all other creatures in the

113 Pope Francis, Pope Francis, _Laudato Si’: On Care for our Common Home_, (Huntington, Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, 2015), #211.
web of life and make a firm resolve to care respect and honor creation with the healing power they have received through the sacrament of reconciliation.

2.6 PRAYER OF REPENTANCE

The rite of examination of conscience helps the penitents and the whole community to examine their past relationship with the earth and the poor, and to facilitate their firm resolution to live in harmony and to respect the integrity of creation in their daily life, and to care for the poor. Now the penitents and the whole community together, led by the priest or minister pray together the prayer of repentance: “I confess to almighty God….” After this they intercede for the whole creation and beg God the Father, through Christ and in the power of through the Holly Spirit, for the grace of true repentance.

2.6.1 Prayer of the faithful

The following prayer might follow:

1. That we may recognize in the God’s wonderful creation his wisdom and love and may be drawn to give him fitting praise and honor, let us pray to the Lord.
   R: Lord hear our prayer

2. That the grace of the Holy Spirit who renews and encourages all things, may enable us to love, respect, care for the poor and all God’s loving creation, let us pray to the Lord
   R: Lord hear our prayer

3. That we who are created in the image and likeness of God, may recognize that we are all brothers and sisters of the same Father with the rest of creation, living together in the web of life, and see ourselves as stewards of creation, not its lord. May we labor to preserve the unity, harmony, and integrity of all God creation, let us pray to the Lord,
   Lord hear our prayer

4. That all humans may work to end the suffering of the poor and vulnerable in our society, and especially the suffering caused by the destruction of environment and help everyone to realize his or her purpose in God’s loving creation. May we work faithfully for its healing and restoration, let us pray to the Lord
R: Lord hear our prayer

5. That the community of nations may work to prevent human and natural disasters, to be humble in using their God-given talents to repair the harm we have all done to God’s creation, and to help sustain God’s gift of nature, let us pray to the Lord

R: Lord hear our prayer

6. That each of us and all God’s people gathered together for this reconciliation service may strive for the transformation of God’s loving creation, let us pray to the Lord

R: Lord hear our prayer.

2.7 INDIVIDUAL CONFESSION, COMMUNAL PRAYER AND ABSOLUTION, AND COMMUNAL PENANCE

2.7.1 Individual Confession

This period proceeds after penitents have examined their consciences, giving them a better awareness of their life before God, and inspiring them with contrition for their sins. Each penitent then opens up his or her heart to God in the presence of the priest, recounting his or her sins against God’s unfailing love and against his loving creation, as well as the injustice, intended or unintended, that s/he has perpetrated the poor and the vulnerable in society. The Catechism of the Catholic Church comments that “when Christ’s faithful strive to confess all the sins that they can remember, they place all of them before the divine mercy for pardon.”114 At this point, the priest acts in the person of Christ who heals and reconciles “as the good shepherd who can to seek for the lost sheep.”115 The priest admonishes the penitent to love, care, and respect God’s creation,

115Ibid., 1505.
and to work for the common good of everyone, including the generations yet unborn. He then offers the penitent absolution.

During this time of individual confession, the other penitents and the Christian assembly awaiting their turn for individual confession may engage in song, quiet reflection or instrumental music can be used.

2.7.2 Communal Prayer: Covenant with Creation

The penitents, now reconciled to the Lord and creation after their individual confessions, stand together to reaffirm their commitment to work to protect God’s creation by entering into a new covenant with God and with creation. This covenant is based on the covenant God made with Noah and Earth’s creatures when they came out of the ark (Gen 9:12-17).

We covenant this day with all creation, with what was, is and will be, with every living creature, those that sustain us and those we sustain; with all that moves upon the earth and with all the earth itself; with all that lives in the water and with the water itself; with all that flies through the air, and with the air itself. We confess that our kind has put all creation at risk. We mark our covenant by God’s rainbow and pledge never again to destroy creation through our greed, our negligence, our selfishness and our lives. Remember, we are earth and to the earth we must return.116

2.7.3 Communal Penance

At this point, the priest gives a communal penance to the penitents – one that can unite them in their efforts to live a renewed lifestyle and that will be a response

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to the suffering Earth and her people that is more effective because it is communal. In my
Nigerian setting, such a penance would be effective:

1. The penitents together participate in the cleaning up of a particular area of environmental degradation in the community: for example cleaning up of a domestic or industrial waste site; cleaning up of streams or drainage areas polluted with public waste by the community; working to restore a polluted river; restoring farmland destroyed by pesticides; planting trees in an area that has been deforested; cleaning up public properties, parks, or gathering spaces; learning how to create solar lanterns and stoves, so as to save wood used for firewood. These actions are proof of the community’s new commitment and resolution to care for the environment and create an ecological awareness.

2. In addition, penitents may also be invited to make an offering of the harvest of their land as a sign of their generous response to God’s goodness. At some future time, they will gather together in the Church, bringing their produce, the work of their hands and a sign of the resilience of the earth. The priest and penitents pray over these earthly gifts, and then share them with the poor, the widow, and the orphans in the community, or contribute them to a local food bank or distribution center. Hence, the return gift to God’s gracious giving.

2.8 SONG OF PRAISE, BLESSING, AND SENDING

Immediately after the communal penance has been given to all the penitents, the whole community of faith stands together to give praise and thanks to the Triune God for the gift of His love and mercy to all creation by singing the Magnificat.

After the Magnificat the priest then blesses the penitents with the sign of the cross and sends them forth with these or other words:

Go and live your vocation to be protectors of God’s creation and friends of all God’s people!

The reconciled community responds: Thanks be to God!

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have tried to articulate how the communal Rite of Reconciliation facilitates the process of ecological conversion using various sacramental in liturgical
elements such as prayers, songs, scripture readings, examination of conscience, prayer of repentance, intercessory prayer, absolution, and communal penance, all of which can open the penitents to experiencing reconciliation with God, with other humans and Creation itself, which is the purpose of an ecological conversion and a fruitful sacramental celebration.

This chapter has also demonstrated how the communal nature of the rite of reconciliation parallels and addresses the communal nature of violence against the earth and the poor. This rite also enabled the penitents to recognize the social and personal sinfulness and the need for an urgent acceptance of communal commitment that will bring about the healing of the earth and hope for a better future for all.
Living a healed and reconciled life is the third part of the process of the sacramental rite of reconciliation. This stage follows the mystagogy pattern in the RCIA. It entails an ongoing formation process for the newly reconciled so as to help them deepen their faith and become part of the restoration of the wounded Creation. Pope Francis stresses that this restoration is a communal process and is usually carried out in a communal manner. “Social problems must be addressed by community networks and not simply by the sum of individual good deeds.” And again, “The ecological conversion needed to bring about lasting change is also a community conversion.”

This chapter explores how an effective transformation and restoration of Creation can be the focus of the concluding stage of sacramental reconciliation. I will explore several different dimensions of reconciliation that can help to build a better world marked by ecological wholeness and human well-being. Although many practices might be explored, I will focus on three dimensions of on-going reconciliation with the earth, namely the spiritual, social and educational dimensions. To create a new world, which this process set out to achieve, and to bring the process of ecological conversion full circle, individuals and communities need to be supported in their efforts to live in right relationship with the Earth, all her peoples and all her myriad creatures.

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3.1 SPIRITUAL DIMENSION OF THE ON-GOING CONVERSION PROCESS

In this section, I will show how the deep recognition of God’s abiding presence in creation can generate a new sense of appreciation and sacredness in human beings. This will include how the weekly gathering of the reconciled community helps them listen to the voice of God and of creation through prayer and breaking of the Word of God and how the observance of the sabbath day of rest and change of lifestyle brings healing and restoration in the relationship between God, human and creation.

3.1.1 Developing a Spirituality of Sacredness and Appreciation

In order to preserve the participants’ growing conviction and ongoing consciousness of the dignity and integrity of creation, there is need to develop a communal sense of the spiritual dimension of the created world and a cultivated sense of Earth’s sacredness. God created the universe and saw that “it was very good” (Gen 1:31), and he is constantly present in it. As Joshtrom Kureethadam points out, “the enduring presence of God in creation becomes all the more real in the event of the incarnation, in which God assumes matter and sanctifies it. It is precisely God’s abiding presence in creation that makes our physical world ultimately sacred.”118 This suggests that the entry of Christ into creation as a human being for the purpose of redemption and in order to create a new creation, and the continued presence of the Spirit of life in the world, make the universe the dwelling place of the Trinity. For this reason, human beings are expected to treat it as a sacred place where God is found and where everything in creation reveals the divine presence and love. Kureethadam further states that “Creation as a whole has

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become a monstrance of God’s real presence.”\textsuperscript{119} It follows that human beings should reverence creation as sacred because it is the home of God. Thus, what is needed as human’s primary response to God’s infinite good and ever-loving presence in the universe is to “appreciate it.”\textsuperscript{120}

Respecting creation holds spiritual value for those who have lived an ecological conversion, enabling them to see the world as the dwelling place of God which should be appreciated and treated as sacred. God’s imprint can be in everything; God is never separated from what he has created. According to Gretel Van, Wieren quoting Sallie McFague, “This God is never absent…we can experience God anywhere and everywhere.”\textsuperscript{121} Everything in creation brings God’s blessing and goodness to his creatures. Thus, there should be a communal response of gratitude and appreciation.

The continued desire for a change of heart, instilled in the reconciliation process, must lead to the communal realization that Creation is a sign of God’s infinite love for all creatures and an awareness that many of them continue to suffer. Side by side with a showing of gratitude and appreciation for God marvelous goodness expressed through and in Creation, there must be a continued awareness of the need to grow in a continued process of metanoia. In the words of Healing a Broken World, “We are still in need of a change of heart. We need to confront our resistance and cast a grateful look on creation, letting our hearts be touched by its wounded reality and making a strong personal and

\textsuperscript{119} Ibid., 300.
\textsuperscript{120} Society of Jesus. Healing A Broken World: Task force on Ecology “Promotio Iustitiae”, no.106(February 2011), #33.
\textsuperscript{121} Gretel Van Wieren, Restored to Earth: Christianity, Environmental Ethics, and Ecological Restoration (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2013), 78.
Clearly human beings who continually receive life and sustenance through creation can yet inflict wounds on it, and must work progressively toward a new life-style, one which is described by Margaret Bannon-Watt as requiring “the acquisition of new qualities such as attentiveness, listening, appreciation, recognition, respect, hope, contemplation, love and delight for the earth.”

3.1.2 Prayer and Bible Study

As a way of communal development and growth, the reconciled community must gather together either weekly or monthly to pray with creation, by contemplating nature in places where they can perceive God’s handiwork, and by hearing Creation’s voice through the studying of the Bible. This study invites them to look and listen for creation’s active presence, beginning particularly with the book of Psalms, the prophets in the Old Testament, and through Jesus’ words and actions in the gospels. In the study of the Bible they become attuned as well to the groaning of the earth and the lamentation of the poor. In affirming this position, Delio writes “We also need to hear in Scripture the voice of suffering nature itself…When the capacity of creation to praise God is diminished, then we hear another voice of Earth, a voice of suffering and languishing, sounds of mourning and lament.”

Through communal gatherings for prayer with nature and sharing the word of God, the reconciled community understands that they are in a relationship of love with

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other creatures and with the God who brings them into existence out of nothing. Edwards emphasizes that creation enjoys a “participation in the Word which enables creature to exist and the whole creation to remain firm and flourish in one community of Creation.”\footnote{Denis Edwards, \textit{Partaking of God: Trinity, Evolution and Ecology} (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2014), 23.} The Word is “‘present in all things’ and ‘gives life and protection to everything, everywhere, to each individually and to all together.’”\footnote{Ibid., 23, quoting Athanasius.} Thus, every creature owes its existence to God; they are interconnected with him and each other in a web of life.

Pope Francis in his encyclical \textit{Laudato Si} points out that contemplating nature is to hear God speak to us and to respond generously. He states that “contemplation of creation allows us to discover in each thing a teaching which God wishes to hand on to us, since for the believer, to contemplate creation is to hear a message, listen to a paradoxical and silent voice.”\footnote{Pope Francis, \textit{Laudato Si: Our Care for our Common Home}, (Huntington, Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, 2015), #85.} As they gather together to pray with nature and allow God to speak to them, participants grow in their commitment to protect the environment and heal the wounds inflicted on the earth through selfish and greedy actions. This process helps them to actively embrace their connectedness with nature and to become more attuned to its voice.

3.1.3 Building a New Lifestyle, Personal and Communal

In today’s world people are obsessed with a consumerist lifestyle, causing humanity to embrace the false idea that material things bring ultimate happiness and joy. Many people hold the belief that freedom is about getting everything that the economic
market offers, whether it is needed or not. The fruit of this situation is that individual interest overrides the common good and leads people to “become self-centered, self-enclosed and individual greed increases.”\textsuperscript{128} These attitudes, according Pope Francis, result in “a feeling of instability and uncertainty, which in turn becomes a seedbed for collective selfishness.”\textsuperscript{129} At this point in time, we cannot continue with life as usual. Creation is under threat, the destruction of the common good is on the increase, and ecological relationships have broken down. In order to ensure a better life and the stability of the environment for present and future generations, humanity is called to re-examine its lifestyle and to build “a new path which leads to authentic freedom.”\textsuperscript{130}

Building a new lifestyle demands “a new way of thinking about our own selves, about our relationship with the world and with God.”\textsuperscript{131} We need a change of mind and heart. This is first and foremost a call to return to the Source and Creator of life, who created everything out of infinite love and goodness, and who is the source of human happiness and satisfaction. Human beings have been appointed as stewards of love within creation, to serve and protect God’s handiwork but never to be its lord. Everything in the universe exists in a communion of love with its Maker and everything is interrelated and interconnected. Happiness comes from finding one’s place in the web of life and enjoying the reciprocity that exists among God’s creatures. In doing so, we come to a deeper recognition that everything bears the imprint of God’s Spirit. Any abuse, misuse or plundering of nature is thus an affront against God, while love and respect for everything

\textsuperscript{128} Ibid., #204.
\textsuperscript{129} Ibid., #204.
\textsuperscript{130} Ibid., #205.
in nature – water, sun, moon, trees, animals, bacteria, and especially the poor and vulnerable in the community – can bring deep joy. Kureethadam further emphasizes that building a new lifestyle demands that human beings must build “...communion with creation itself. This means recreating communion with all the members of the common household, both human and nonhuman and with the rest of creation.” This requires love, respect for the dignity and rights of others, maintaining equal access to the common good, and preserving the commonwealth for the good of future generation.

Building a new lifestyle in a world of overconsumption will require that everyone re-evaluate their “needless waste and overconsumption.” Households will need to cut down the amount of consumer goods they use, limiting them to basic necessities, in order to preserve natural resources and avoid unnecessary waste. The community should encourage the process of recycling of matter, while encouraging individuals and communities to live a life of poverty by sharing their wealth with others. Above all, everyone needs to discern how their lifestyles impact the rest of Creation and make necessary changes.

3.1.4 Observing the Sabbath Day Rest

Observing a Sabbath day of rest is critical to the restoration of the Earth and building community support for “keeping the Sabbath” is an important part of this third stage of the reconciliation process. On Sunday, which parallels the ancient Jewish practice of Sabbath rest, Christians participate in the Sunday Eucharistic celebration.

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132 Ibid., 361.
134 Ibid., 186.
According to Pope Francis in *Laudato Si*, “Sunday is the day of the Resurrection and is meant to be a day which heals our relationship with God, with ourselves, with others and with the world.” On this day when Christians gather together at the table of the Word and the Eucharist to thank the Father of all goodness for the salvation won for the world through Christ’s redemptive love, they are also called to contemplate the beauty of creation as they enjoy rest with one another. In keeping with the biblical injunction to “keep holy the Lord’s day,” people must be encouraged to reconnect with their families and friends, to relax together and enjoy common fraternity. The observance of sabbath, Pope Francis explains, “protects human action from becoming empty activism; it also prevents that unfettered greed and sense of isolation which makes us seek personal gain to the detriment of all else.” The observance of sabbath can drive home the importance and necessity of communal sharing, humility, justice, mercy, and love for the wellbeing of others over a craze for individual selfishness, greed or pleasure. In celebrating and observing sabbath rest, human beings bond themselves together in a communion of love with the God in whom creation finds it final rest.

Sabbath is to be observed as a day of peace for all creation. Kureethadam explains that “it is important to note that observance of the sabbath is structured at a triple level, involving God, fellow humans, and the whole of creation, with all these levels interlinked.” On the sabbath day people live in peace with God and worship him for the beauty and goodness of creation, even as human beings are expected to be at peace

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135 Pope Francis, *Laudato Si: On Care for our Common Home*, (Huntington, Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, 2015), #237.
136 Ibid., #237
with each other. They worship together and feed at the table of love, exchanging their gift with the poor and the vulnerable. On Sunday, we live in peace with the animals and all creatures who inhabit the land. The law of weekly rest, found in Exodus, not only forbade human work on the seventh day, but demanded that “your ox and your donkey may have rest, and the son of your maidservant, and the stranger, may be refreshed” (Ex 23:12). In this way, everyone is free from fear and anxieties and all dwell in peace which is the realization of the new creation and the fulfillment of eschatological hope.

3.2 THE SOCIAL DIMENSION OF THE ON-GOING ECOLOGICAL CONVERSION PROCESS

As we know, human beings have social relationships and their coming together gives meaning to their existence. This section highlights the importance of growing in fraternal love and communion for every member of the earth family; the recognition that women are teachers and healers within the community, especially with regard to the care of Creation; and the importance of human beings appointed by God as stewards of creation to act together to protect and care for the poor and creation.

3.2.1 Developing Social Love

The reconciled community now equipped and commissioned, described earlier as an ‘agent of change,’ is called to develop social concern for all creatures. As Pope Francis emphasizes in *Laudato Si*, “care for nature is part of a lifestyle which includes the capacity for living together and communion.” Recognizing kinship with all creatures entails a development of fraternal love for all God’s Creation, especially the poor and the vulnerable, human and non-human, and a new seeing of the entire universe as one family.

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138 Pope Francis, *Laudato Si: On Care for our Common Home*, (Huntington, Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, 2015), 228.
in a communion of love. Like a spider reweaving her web, human beings are commissioned to constantly reweave the web of life broken through careless or selfish action. No single creature is isolated, as we are interrelated. Furthermore, Pope Francis explains, “We must regain the conviction that we need one another, that we have a shared responsibility for others and the world, and that being good and decent are worth it.”

Today there is an urgent need to create an atmosphere that opens the door for a renewed commitment to share with the poor and vulnerable in the society. Pope Francis highlights the importance of charity in the individual and communal sharing of gifts and wealth with one another. Every person has something good in them to share with others. According to Francis, we need to “practice the little way of love” as exemplified by Saint Therese of Lisieux: “not to miss out on a kind word, a smile or any small gesture which sows peace and friendship.” The daily practice of charity brings people closer to one another, destroys selfishness, greed and exploitation which leads to violence and the destruction of the environment. Supporting a reconciled community as they work to build mutual care for one another will affect their civic, political and economic life of their respective society. Pope Francis argues that “social love is the key to authentic development.” Even small gestures of love are what enriches society and helps protect the common good and care for the environment. Participants can continue to grow by engaging in social services geared toward building the life of the whole community of life, such as cleaning public spaces or dumping sites, serving as volunteers for relief purposes and for social services, and coming together to maintain and protect community

139 Ibid., #229.
140 Ibid., #230.
141 Ibid., #231.
gardens. They can work to engage organizations and corporations in community development projects such as building of schools, hospitals and social amenities that enhance the decent living of the poor, the vulnerable and everyone in the society.

3.2.2 Acting Together on behalf of Creation

As noted before, the task of caring for the earth, and especially for the poor and vulnerable, is a collective responsibility. Recreating a new world or attaining on-going ecological conversion cannot be achieved only by individual efforts. Everyone is required to participate actively. Pope Francis states that “self-improvement on the part of individuals will not by itself remedy the extremely complex situation facing our world today…The ecological conversion needed to bring about lasting change is also a community conversion.” 142 Humanity is called to act collectively on behalf of creation. The responsibility to care for creation demands that humans must work together in a collaborative effort, acting together to ensure that proper laws are put in place that protect creation, ensuring that there is equal justice for all people, especially the poor and vulnerable in the community.

David Rhoads emphasizes that caring for creation is a collective trust.

[W]e need urgently to act collectively as stewards in our responsibilities to creation at the local, state, regional and global levels. We need to support laws and policies and systems that promote the health of the environment – promoting cooperation with global treaties, strengthening legislation that secures clean air, safe water, and productive land; advocating for policies that reduce energy consumption and assure species diversity; placing limits on land use and on wastes; and investing in environmental technologies… Commitment to ecological justice demands that we attend especially to the poor and vulnerable, the most affected by ecological degradation.” 143

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142 Ibid., #219.
Reconciled communities are natural places for acting corporately to bring about change.

3.3 EDUCATIONAL DIMENSION OF THE ON-GOING ECOLOGICAL CONVERSION PROCESS

As the saying goes, education is power. Ecological education is a continuous way of formation, a process of character formation, creating new awareness in the development of the environment and care for the poor in the community, especially for the young. Education for ecological literacy is crucial for the ongoing life of those who have entered the reconciliation process. Along with Pope Francis, I emphasize here the importance of ecological education in homes and schools as it prepares everyone in the community to make good choices, to protect the earth and seek for ecological justice for the poor and vulnerable in society.

3.3.1 Arenas for ecological education: Families, Schools, and Seminaries/ Houses of Formation

Ecological education expands people’s consciousness to the dynamics of life on the planet and forms young and old to cultivate new habits, which foster unity and harmony between God, one another and the world. Ecological literacy is essential for human and Christian life. Moreover, according to Pope Francis, “ecological education can take place in variety of settings: at school, in the families, in the media, in catechesis and elsewhere. Good education plants seeds when we are young, and these continue to bear fruit throughout life.”¹⁴⁴ He stresses that the family is the most important place where God’s gift of life is welcomed and protected: “In the family we first learn how to show

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., #213.
love and respect for life; we are taught the proper use of things, order and cleanliness, respect for local ecosystem and care for all creatures. It is in the family, through daily practice, that we learn how to share our life with others and to care for and respect the environment. Francis notes that in addition to the family, political and social institutions should be involved in creating public awareness of the ecological crisis. Moreover, “all Christian communities have an important role to play in ecological education. It is my hope,” he adds, “that our seminaries and houses of formation will provide an education in responsible simplicity of life, in grateful contemplation of God’s world, and in concern for the needs of the poor…and the environment.”

The Jesuit document “Healing a Broken World,” likewise emphasizes that young people should be formed in such a way that they can build a new just world in which they grow cordial relationships with the environment. Those in charge of formation in the schools, universities, seminaries and houses of religious formation, it contends, must “develop an environmental ethic where students, faculty, staff and administrators participate in lowering consumption, and increasing reuse and recycling, and are committed to reducing the campus environmental footprint and greening the campus.” Through this learning process, they develop ecological consciousness that can make a difference in the society and be a model of change. There is an urgent need at the various levels of formation to incorporate “curricula that address sustainability issues and imparting a certain level of environmental literacy. This may involve developing an

145 Ibid., #213.
146 Ibid., #214.
ethics of fair consumption, promoting Corporate Social Responsibility*148 for the good and wellbeing of the everyone in the society, especially the poor and vulnerable and the environment.

3.3.2 Education beyond Consumerism

In the world of extreme consumerism as Pope Francis refers to it, there is need for the reconciled community to be guided by the ecological education and awareness that not everything that the economic market offers them is essential for their existence. In today’s world, where people have been pushed to believe that their security and happiness depend solely on acquisition of material possession, this on-going sacramental process is geared toward helping to provide participants with guidance and direction on the difference between needs and wants. There is no doubt that the economic market system is designed to force people to buy its every product for the purpose of making a large profit. It is necessary that people are formed in such a way that they can withstand the persuasive pressure of the market and acquire only things that are necessary for their existence, which can cut their footprint on the environment. Pope Francis stresses that “Amid the confusion, postmodern humanity has not yet achieved a new self-awareness capable of offering guidance and direction, and this lack of identity is a source of anxiety.”149 The purpose of this on-going sacramental process of ecological conversion is to equip the reconciled community, who has been trained to be an agent of change, to

148 Ibid., #80.
149 Pope Francis, Laudato Si’: On Care for our Common Home, (Huntington, Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division,2015), #203.
make choices about what they consume, what is truly essential for their existence, and to reduce their impact on the environment.

What people consume is in large measure shaped by the society in which they live. The living conditions in their environment inform the choices they make about what they consume and what is important and necessary for them to live a simple lifestyle. Most often, individuals and families compare their standard of living with other people around them. The sacramental process of the ecological conversion affords the reconciled community the opportunity to discern together their choices: in the words of Delio, to “discern between greed and need.”150 The yardstick for the determination between needs and wants should be based on sacrifices, generosity and fraternal love. Christopher Uhl explains that making a choice on needs and wants should provoke questions such as: “Could I live without this product? Will it truly enhance my well-being? Will it bring me genuine happiness?”151 In the consumer society in which we live, most of those things that human beings acquire are unnecessary and not essential for their well-being and happiness. Thus, Delio further proposes that values of sustainability, community and justice should be the measurement to guide and direct choices rather than convenience and ease.152 Wise decisions concerning needs and wants demand time, reflection, and discernment so as to make informed and wise decisions.

3.3.3 Education for The Reduction of Waste.

150 Ilia Delio, et al, Care for Creation: a Franciscan spirituality of the Earth (Huntington: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, Inc, 2015), 188
152 Ibid.,188.
In today’s world, the generation of waste has become part of our day to day experiences. We hear from our Yoruba elders that our beautiful world has become disfigured with all kinds of waste, ranging from domestic to industrial waste. According to Pope Francis, we have developed a “throwaway culture.” Furthermore, he emphasizes that there is one kind of ecological waste that affects all human beings: “there is also pollution that affects everyone, caused by transportation, industrial fumes, substances which contributes to the acidification of soil and water, fertilizers, insecticides, fungicides, herbicides and agrotoxins in general.” The increase in the generation of this waste continues to impact negatively on the life of the people, especially the poor and the environment. In his words, they “produce a broad spectrum of health hazards, especially for the poor, and causes millions of premature deaths.” In order to save humanity from these needless pains, and a complete destruction of the environment, there is an urgent need to reduce waste generation.

Reconciled communities can learn how to engage in practical ways of reducing waste, including cutting their consumption, recycling used material, and assisting in the composting of organic waste that can give rise to a new generation of plants. This will create a proper waste management process in the community. Pope Francis, therefore, suggests some practical measures, for example, the avoidance of the use of plastic and paper, reduction in water consumption, the use of public transportation or carpooling. All these measures can help to reduce waste and pollution in the community.

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154 Ibid., #20.
155 Ibid., #20.
156 Ibid., #211.
It is obvious that human development of modern technology has resulted in the high generation of waste in the environment. The only way to reduce this is to limit human consumption of goods and to advance the process of re-cycling in communities. Alternatively, those who generate these waste products are encouraged to adopt sustainable environmental practices and strategies. Uhl underscores that “in the natural world there is no such thing as trash or garbage; there everything is re-cycled.”

### 3.3.4 Expanding Public Awareness of the Ecological Crisis

Despite the growing call for ecological conversion by Pope Francis, previous Church leaders, governments and public agencies, it is sad to note that little success has been recorded in bringing to people’s consciousness the seriousness and gravity of the ecological crises and the urgent need for a change of lifestyle. So much still needs to be done to expand public awareness of this crisis. Below are strategies that might be explored by communities in this last stage of the reconciliation journey:

- First and foremost, environmental awareness should be included as part of the educational program in primary and secondary schools so as to create early awareness for children.
- On the parish level, talks and short videos can be introduced in the liturgical celebration on an occasional Sunday to create awareness and educate members on the ecological crisis.

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• The reconciled community who has now been formed into change agents can embark on a one-on-one enlightenment campaign at the community level to create public awareness.

• The parish can organize a day of prayer for creation in the community where all the members come together to pray with nature.

• They may also organize an environmental march in the community.

• They could organize a clean-up exercise of a dump site or canal in the community.

• Talks can be organized in the parish or basic Church community group meetings to educate people on the problem of ecological crisis and call people to change their lifestyle.

• There should be environmental awareness training for the youth in the parish community who can passionately drive the process of ecological awareness within their peer group.

• On the diocesan level, there is need for collaboration between the diocesan pastoral centers and the various parishes to initiate and introduce environmental awareness as part of their catechetical instruction for pastoral agents who will help create ecological awareness at the grassroots level.158

• The diocesan pastoral office can also consider the possibility of developing a simple series of booklets or videos, materials, and fact sheets, as well as and

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making available resources from other religious organizations and civil society organizations on issues of ecological crisis.\textsuperscript{159}

Conclusion

In this chapter I have demonstrated how three avenues of personal and communal action, which constitute the third stage of the process of sacramental reconciliation, can help to build up and deepen the newly reconciled community in their role as agents of change. I have explored the spiritual dimension of this process, which involves the developing of a spirituality of sacredness and appreciation, a practice of coming together to pray and break open of the Word of God, personal and collective efforts to change one’s lifestyle, and the observance of Sabbath rest, which can bring restoration and transformation of the earthly community.

I have also explored the social dimension of living more fully as kin among all God’s creatures, and the formation of a parish commitment to developing social concern for the poor and the vulnerable through ecological justice.

Finally, I have shown how the educational dimension can make for a healthy earth and wellbeing of the poor and vulnerable through an ecological education which can take place in families, schools, seminaries and houses of formation. All these can help the community to form their consciences in making a choice between wants and needs, can lead them to a reduction of waste, and expand public awareness of the ecological crisis. With these efforts, the sacramental process of reconciliation comes to a close, but its effects continue for many years to come.

\textsuperscript{159} Ibid., #78
GENERAL CONCLUSION

This thesis has proposed a sacramental process for achieving an ecological consciousness and conversion through the sacramental rite of reconciliation. The process explored is modeled after the three-phased RCIA process. Chapter One uses the preparatory process of the RCIA as model for the first period of reconciliation. This phase deals with the human response to God’s invitation to care for Creation. It employs a guided process by which participants are mentored and involves times of prayer and worship. It invites participants to explore the Church’s teaching on the current ecological crisis, with special focus on Pope Francis’ encyclical *Laudato Si* and *Healing a Broken World* by the Society of Jesus’ Task Force on Ecology. This period also focuses on the church’s teaching on social sin, communal responsibility and social response, and gives participants first-hand experience of the crises, exemplified here by my eyewitness account of daily degradation in my own community in Nigeria, which reflects what is happening in all corners of the world.

Chapter two focuses on the actual Rite of Reconciliation (Rite 11). It explores the different elements of the rite of the sacrament of reconciliation – prayers, songs, scripture readings, examination of conscience, absolution, and a common penance – which can open the hearts of participants to an ecological conversion. The rite described focuses on the communal nature of violence against the earth and includes an acknowledgement of both social and personal sinfulness and the need for a communal commitment to healing the earth community.

Chapter three, which mirrors the RCIA process of mystagogy, is a continuation of the sacrament of Reconciliation, which includes study and reflection on Catholic social
teaching. This last phase of the sacramental process is an ongoing formation that is
grounded toward transformation and restorative action and a growing into a new attitude
which is an outcome of an ecological conversion. In shaping this phase I employed three
dimensions of lived conversion: spiritual, social and educational. Together these can
serve as a means to repair the already damaged environment and renew our broken
relationship with God, creation and one another. The goal is to restore ecological and
social harmony, while fostering the well-being of the planetary community.

In what follows, I will identify five insights that flow from this thesis.

Creating new models for ecological responsibility. During my class on Liturgy
and Ecology, I realized that so many calls have been made for an ecological conversion.
In recent years, Pope John Paul II, Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis have written
extensively, calling humanity into a new relationship with the whole of creation. Despite
the frequent calls, and all the various writings by many authors and theologians on this
topic, not many models for how to live it have emerged. This sacramental model provides
a practical and practicable approach that can be implemented in many contexts. It also
demonstrates how a sacramental process can use the Rite of Reconciliation as a key for
engaging in an integral ecological conversion.

The nature of conversion. It is important to understand that conversion is always a
process that takes time and growth into a new understanding. An ecological conversion is
no different. It must involve first a progressive realization of the sin in which people
participate or the lack of awareness that might be operative for them. Second, it involves
a new awareness of the moral wrong involved and recognition that the call to conversion
is addressed to each of us. Third, conversion implies changes, new ways of acting and
living that conform our lives to a new vision. All of these are necessary if a real ecological conversion is to be realized, and all are given time and guidance in this sacramental process.

*The nature of social sin.* Social sin requires a reconciliation process that is truly social. As Pope Francis points out, individual culpability and individual efforts to rebuild the damaged ecological systems are not enough – only collective action will begin to heal the broken world. Thus, in *Laudato Si* he emphasizes that “social problems must be addressed by community networks and not simply by the sum of individual good deeds”\(^{160}\) By entering into a truly social process in this extended sacrament of reconciliation – all three phases of which are lived in a community of persons who seek change together – the nature of social responsibility becomes more evident and operative, and the fruit of the conversion process is strengthened because of the bonds they build with each other and the desire to work together to sustain their new resolves.

*A true ecological conversion is at once a spiritual, intellectual, social, and ecological process.* Without the spiritual formation by which God’s Creation is recognized as gift, and the human call to tend God’s garden is heard, the ecological and social response will lack depth, and lack the spiritual resources of prayer and worship necessary to sustain it. Without formation in the teaching of the church, people lack the intellectual concepts – such as the common good and preferential option for the poor – that give them models and frameworks for their action. Without being connected socially with others who are striving for conversion, as well as with persons who are suffering extensively from ecological destruction, their individual efforts will be difficult to

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sustain. Without a first-hand experience of ecological desecration and destruction, they can easily dismiss the urgency of the call to change and transformation. The sacramental process explored in this thesis addresses all these dimensions as related to each other.

This sacramental process of reconciliation has implications for other sacraments. This thesis creates a template for a way of celebrating other sacraments. It creates an extended form for the celebration of the sacraments that enables the recipients to internalize the integrity of the sacrament. Taking matrimony as an example, there is currently a process of pre-marriage formation for the intending couple and the sacramental celebration of the rite itself, but there is no post-marriage formation for the newly-wedded couples in order to support them in an on-going way in their new vocation.

The process model of sacraments can create an environment whereby the recipients of the sacraments grow and deepen their faith and can be accompanied in the new life with the aid and support of the Christian community. They are never left alone in the struggles of life after the reception of the sacraments, but they walk along with the faith-community in order to build a Christian family that can witness to the Christian faith.
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