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Theological inspiration in building of integral ecology

Abstract

Ecological issues constitute an important and constantly developed subject in the contemporary teaching of the Church as well as theological reflection. What is significant, it is not an exclusivist activity but is characterised by great openness towards the achievements of other sciences engaged in ecological issues. It particularly strongly emphasises the moral and axiological dimension of human activeness and calls for restraining the still prevailing temptation to understand economic and technological development or progress in isolation from other areas that make up human existence. Worth noting is the importance of awakening man's responsibility for the good of the created world that God entrusted to him. Avoiding anthropocentrism on one hand and specific biolatry on the other show that the idea of primacy of the human person is sensible when it is combined with the awareness of man's task to perpetuate and build common good encompassing not only humankind but all creation.

Key words: Ecotheology, Gospel of Creation, Human Ecology, Ecological Conversion, Integral Development

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Paradoxically, notwithstanding extensive popularisation of ecological problems and the consequent growth of ecological consciousness, the very term of “ecology” is becoming ever more incomprehensible. This is due to the constant expansion of the semantic field of this word and its being used in various contexts and semantic connotations. Not without meaning is the emotional and moralising permeation of the ecological discourse, which is subordinated to the interests of certain groups with very different, frequently even contradictory worldviews. In this context, postulates formulated by ecotheology, an intensively developing field of theological science interpreting ecological problems in the perspective of Revelation, seem to be very important.¹ It puts ecological problems in a broader existential and cultural context as well as offers an opportunity for their fuller and unambiguous perception thanks to a language different than that used in natural ecology.

Towards full truth

Owing to their methodological specificity various field of study – although frequently investigating the same subject – formulate a certain knowledge thereon that is specific to them. Although it is undoubtedly valuable and meets the criteria of scientificity, it is never full knowledge. It does concern also ecology. Therefore, it is necessary not only to accumulate knowledge on this subject, but also to seek full truth about the reality. This is unquestionably attainable when scientists representing various narrow and specialised field of knowledge become open to other

¹ Cf. Babiński (2011): 289–298.

ways of cognition and viewpoints with respect to ecological problems.

First, it is necessary to realise the temptation of its ideologization in spite of the generally claimed objectiveness of scientific research. It is always manifested by attempts to substantiate worldview positions by science (frequently within the framework of a given field), which always makes it *ancilla ideologiae*. This is amply described by Pope Francis when he discerns utterly different interpretations of issues in the area of ecology: At one extreme, we find those who doggedly uphold the myth of progress and tell us that ecological problems will solve themselves simply with the application of new technology and without any need for ethical considerations or deep change. At the other extreme are those who view men and women and all their interventions as no more than a threat, jeopardizing the global ecosystem, and consequently the presence of human beings on the planet should be reduced and all forms of intervention prohibited.”²

It is clear that in this ideological entanglement it is hard to dare assume an attitude of openness and acceptance of pluralism of positions, recognition of the fact that truth is “symphonic”.³ “Symphonicity” should by no means be understood as an attempt at cognitive legitimisation of agnosticism or relativism, but the recognition of the need for having a multifaceted look at the reality. Such cognizance is a precondition for discovering the truth. Cognizance which is not reduced to physical or biological knowledge, but taking into account its functioning in a broader cultural context, which

² Francis (2015): 60.

³ Cf. Balthasar (1998): 73.

is made up of, among others, religion, morality or arts, “enriching” empirical knowledge with a broader context of comprehension and perception. The ecological issue has to be considered in exactly such manner. Ecological problems are not a product of sublime production, infrastructural or technological processes functioning in total isolation from other elements of reality, but constitute an integral element of human existence: “The deterioration of nature is in fact closely connected to the culture that shapes human coexistence.”⁴ Its integral element is always the sphere of people’s religiousness, which is undoubtedly a significant determinant of human activeness, choices and actions. Hence, theological reflection on ecological issues and taking it into account in the comprehensive vision of ecology is a condition for understanding ecological problems as well as creating integral solutions aimed at overcoming the ecological crisis.

Hence, although ecology is primarily understood as a natural science – it has a clearly defined subject and methods – it must be an open discipline with reference to other fields and sciences. What is more, its achievements are used as inspirations in other areas of science, especially in broadly conceived humanities and theology. That is why it has become part of so-called supersciences (another term: trans-disciplinary sciences), whose task is to unify efforts of individual disciplines of human knowledge in order to create a picture of the problem which would be as comprehensive and full as possible.⁵

⁴ Benedict XVI (2009): 51.

⁵ Cf. Odum (1982): 3; Poznański (2019): 86–87.

Gospel of creation

The theological perspective broadens the comprehension of reality. It proposes to understand it not only as nature functioning according to the laws of ecosystems, but considers it from a transcendental viewpoint, for which the term “creation” is particularly evocative. This is strongly pointed out by Pope Francis in the encyclical *Ludato si'*: In the Judaeo-Christian tradition, the word «creation» has a broader meaning than «nature», for it has to do with God's loving plan in which every creature has its own value and significance. Nature is usually seen as a system which can be studied, understood and controlled, whereas creation can only be understood as a gift from the outstretched hand of the Father of all, and as a reality illuminated by the love which calls us together into universal communion.”⁶ There are two issues that are worth noting here.

Man is an integral element of the created world. He is not an intruder interfering into the order of nature from the outside but in his existence has been included into the existence and development of the world, with which he shares fate and future. Communion with all creatures calls for making an effort to understand their needs and rights, a kind of empathy towards them and respect since all have been made by the same Creator. If “everything in the world is connected,”⁷ man has to make an effort to ever more fully understand the existing relations and interdependencies as well as take them into account in his activities. What is more, as regards building an integral vision of the struggle for the future of our world

⁶ Francis (2015): 76.

⁷ Ibidem: 16.

this “connection” may be interpreted as the need to solve ecological problems on various levels: the multidimensional vision of scientific ecology, awakening individual ecological sensitivity of each man, consolidating local, regional or nationwide initiatives, to global activities taken up by the international community.⁸

Another question is to understand the world created as a gift of the love of God for man. The awareness of having been given something always generates gratitude. It is to be manifested in the attitude of making the best possible use of the goods received. This involves the effort to understand the intention of the Giver. After all, giving the earth to man involves “making it subdued” (Genesis 1:28), which is to be realised with consideration being given to the values, dignity and rights the Creator conferred on His creation. It requires overcoming the unidimensional, extremely anthropocentric way of thinking about one’s place in the world, which in practice is marked with “a technique of possession, mastery and transformation.”⁹

Of course, man is “the crown of creation”, his existence is marked with purposefulness with respect to the deed of creation. After all, the created world is in God’s intention a space for realisation of the life’s vocation by man. It was given to him by the Creator as a place of creative responding to the gift of His love. That response is to be realised, however, not by the selfish subordination of all creatures and fulfilment of own aspiration at their cost, heedless of negative consequences suffered by other beings. The postulated attitude of gratitude mans the need to succumb to God, observe

⁸ Cf. Benedict XVI (2009): 50; Benedict XVI (2009a).

⁹ Francis (2015): 106.

the laws granted to the world and creatively use the creation, always with the sense of unity with it and harmonisation of the purposes mapped out for the world by the Creator and man who reads His will. Betraying this plan through actions that are contrary to it or ignoring it by man leads to the degradation of the world of nature. We observe “the ravages caused in the world of nature by people who ignore the explicit rules of the order and harmony concealed in that world.”¹⁰ [Nie mogę znaleźć tego cytatu] Hence the need to build integral ecology, an especially important element of which should be properly conceived human ecology.

Human ecology

Human ecology is built on the foundation of natural ecology, which studies numerous acosystemic interdependencies. Obviously, it also takes into account the influence and impact of man as an integral element of the world of nature. However, it also underlines the uniqueness of man as a being that transcends the order of nature through “his activeness which is in a relation to nature but also to other people and to itself, more precisely individual elements of his existence. Any actions taken up within those relations, which are in compliance with the nature of the person contribute to their development. The sense and purpose of their life go beyond the material world and there, on the transcendental level the peak of integral development is reached. From the theological viewpoint it is salvation, in which they enter perfect communion whose image they are and from whom they originate.”¹¹

¹⁰ John Paul II (1996): 15.

¹¹ Wyrostkiewicz (2007).

This involves a broader look at man than only from the viewpoint of biology and nature. This should be understood as assuming a personalistic perspective in looking at the role of man in the world. He is undoubtedly related with the world of nature, but at the same time his existence includes elements that cannot be reduced to animalism, from among which his reason and freedom are in the forefront.¹² This is the source of his enormous impact on the functioning of the world and his clear domination therein. However, this by no means warrants the right to usurp God's prerogatives for oneself. As a creation, he must respect the order of the world designed by the Creator.¹³ The divine law specifies human competences in the world but also adds teleological characteristics to human activeness which although is realised in the world finds its ultimate sense and purpose also beyond earthliness and time.

Therefore, it is necessary to build a holistic concept of man, which takes into account his being rooted in the world (carnality) as well as his moral and spiritual dimension. Carnality decides about man's entering into a spontaneous and direct relationship with the surrounding world: "Man's presence in the world is the presence of his live body."¹⁴ Such ontic "construction" of man by God constitutes – in the opinion of Pope Francis – a hint for understanding human mission in the world and adequate specification of the relationship with the creation. "The acceptance of our bodies as God's gift is vital for welcoming and accepting the entire world as a gift from the Father and our common home, whereas thinking that we enjoy absolute power over our own bodies turns,

¹² Cf. Wyrostkiewicz (2016): 65.

¹³ Cf. Benedict XVI (2011): 41–42.

¹⁴ Krąpiec (2005): 157.

often subtly, into thinking that we enjoy absolute power over creation. Learning to accept our body, to care for it and to respect its fullest meaning, is an essential element of any genuine human ecology.”¹⁵

In turn, the moral dimension underlines the issue of making responsible decisions by man. Those should always be oriented at the good. In the context of ecology, this concerns not only personal, individual good, not only the good of man understood as a species or global community, but as the creation. Therefore, activities in the ecological space should be based on the very broadly conceived principle of common good. Its understanding by the Vatican Council as “the sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfilment”¹⁶ speaks in the first place about the human persons and the communities they form. In the ecological perspective, it requires that it is extended to all creation, while man is entrusted with special care for its current and future wellbeing. The notion of the common good also embraces the future. Francis introduced in the context the concept of „a logic of receptivity, which is on loan to each generation, which must then hand it on to the next.”¹⁷ The earth and its resources have not been given to a single generation but to entire mankind. Therefore, future generations also have the right to use it, to enjoy the richness and beauty of the creation. This is but another argument for undertaking actions and functioning according to the pro-ecological model.

¹⁵ Francis (2005): 155.

¹⁶ Vatican Council II (2002): 26.

¹⁷ Francis (2005): 159.

The spiritual dimension of human ecology binds faith with reason. The creation – brought to existence by God – should be recognized as a “Gospel”, which reveals its Creator and allows for His contemplation.¹⁸ Its foundation in the biblically revealed truth of the creation of the inanimate world, animate world and human beings, which shows God as loving the creation.¹⁹ However, also contemplation of the existing world uncovers the truth about God’s love.²⁰ The truth about God-Love is emphasised in the mystery of Redemption, which is the beginning of a new stage in the relationship between God and His creation, who through incarnation of Jesus Christ has become connected with all most spiritual as well as most carnal elements of the universe. This constitutes a foundation for building eschatological “new earth and heaven”, for establishing peace among all creatures, and ultimately for full unification with God and fulfilment of one’s vocation. This in the first place is manifested in assuming protection as well as preservation and life of all creatures.²¹

Integral development

The relation to the world of nature has its consequences for the ethical and axiological concept of man, and how it is understood has a fundamental impact on the determination of principles underlying ethical or axiological assessments of human behaviour. Proposals formulated by ecotheology are meant to eliminate unilaterally extreme solutions.

¹⁸ Cf. Tatar (2016): 65.

¹⁹ Cf. Bartnik (2000): 253.

²⁰ Cf. John Paul II (1997): 237.

²¹ Cf. Espíndola García, Lodoño (2016): 159.

The first one is the extreme anthropocentrism of man's relationship with nature. It is characterised by the supreme and dominating attitude of man toward the creation, which always leads to the overthrow of equilibrium between them. Benedict XVI calls it "superdevelopment" in the technological dimension which is accompanied by "moral underdevelopment".²² Overcome with a passionate desire to realise the set goals, man can neither objectively evaluate his behaviour nor build a reasonable genuine hierarchy. What is particularly important here is that considering it the priority to realise fully his visions of development man is unable to perceive fully the consequences as well as objectively appraise their potential costs.²³

On the other hand, the proposal to depreciate man in favour of personalisation, sacralisation or spiritualisation of natural environment is equally destructive. This type of ideas always lead to objectification of the human person or treating it as something much less significant than the world of nature or simply a redundant element to be eliminated: "...it is contrary to authentic development to view nature as something more important than the human person. This position leads to attitudes of neo-paganism or a new pantheism — human salvation cannot come from nature alone, understood in a purely naturalistic sense."²⁴ The temptation to obliterate or actually eliminate the ontic and axiological difference between the human person and other living things lead to questioning the supreme identity and role of man in the world, and in consequence promoting egalitarian vision of the "dignity"

²² Cf. Benedykt XVI (2009): 29.

²³ Cf. Ibidem: 21.

²⁴ Ibidem: 48. Those tendencies are frequently called ecocentrism or biocentrism. Cf. Grzesica (1993): 61–63.

of all living creatures. Invoking the authority of the biblical revelation, theological reflection stresses that man has been given the role of a steward and administrator with responsibility over creation. It is the role that man must certainly not abuse, but also one which he may not abdicate.²⁵

The attitude negating permissibility of any human interference into the world of nature because of its sanctity, integrity or inviolability leads to rejecting or undermining the idea of progress as such. Denying man the possibility to act through defining him as bad by nature, always brutally and illegitimately interfering into the world of nature, is devoid of any moral or ontological justification owing to pre-conceived exclusively negative consequences. It should be also emphasised that it is in contradiction with the concept of man and his mission in the world based on the biblical foundation. Man who subdues earth is capable of great and good things: “Every day we encounter the genius of human achievement. From advances in medical sciences and the wise application of technology, to the creativity reflected in the arts, the quality and enjoyment of people’s lives in many ways are steadily rising.”²⁶

That is why ecotheology – according to the teachings of the Popes of the 21st century – postulates the concept of integral development. It understands it as man’s presence and activity in the world characterised by equilibrium between activity in the technical-economic and moral-religious aspects.²⁷ Technical progress is sensible and in an appropriate form when it is combined with spiritual and ethical development, the direction of which is mapped out by such values

²⁵ Cf. Benedict XVI (2010): 13.

²⁶ Benedict XVI (2008): 10–12.

²⁷ Benedict XVI (2007): 9.

as love, responsibility, solidarity.²⁸ Of course, when talking about man's integral development it is impossible to ignore reference to God, which is the most important dimension of ecotheology. It is impossible to reflect on the relationship between man and the world in a sensible and exhaustive manner when reducing the horizon of Transcendence: "Without the perspective of eternal life, human progress in this world is denied breathing-space. Enclosed within history, it runs the risk of being reduced to the mere accumulation of wealth; humanity thus loses the courage to be at the service of higher goods, at the service of the great and disinterested initiatives called forth by universal charity."²⁹

Man is capable of respecting "the intrinsic balance of creation"³⁰ and properly realise his vocation when he does not lose his reference to the Creator, which allows him to recognise his mission correctly. What is more, getting to know the world and making use of its goods must be done with the awareness of responsibility for its future, with respect for natural environment and life of every creature. Man must not be a short-sighted egoist: „At the same time we must recognize our grave duty to hand the earth on to future generations in such a condition that they too can worthily inhabit it and continue to cultivate it. (...) Let us hope that the international community and individual governments will succeed in countering harmful ways of treating the environment."³¹

²⁸ Cf. Benedict XVI (2009): 19.

²⁹ Ibidem: 11.

³⁰ Ibidem: 48.

³¹ Ibidem: 50.

Ecological conversion

The task of the Church is to proclaim the Gospel to all people, while the foundation of this mission and its opening to the world through dialogue is the opening of God-Love to entire creation. In this context, the presence of the Church in the world may assume various forms. It may be a dialogue within the Church itself, and more precisely – between various Christian denominations. In this case, we shall deal with an ecumenical dialogue, an integral element of which is also the ecological issue. It may be an inter-religious dialogue, which despite doctrinal differences seeks common areas for cooperation in building common good. It is obvious that also in this context ecology constitutes one of the most important issues. It may also be a religious-social dialogue, i.e. carried out, among other things, by finding potential areas of cooperation between the Church and international, national or local community structures.

A common denominator for all those types of dialogue seems to be the concept of “ecological conversion” worked out by ecotheology. It involves the need to change human attitude to the creation. It means that “man should communicate with nature as an intelligent and noble «master» and «guardian», and not as a heedless «exploiter».”³² However, ecological conversion does not mean only individual inner transformation, but also a change in the mentality of societies or communities. After all, “self-improvement on the part of individuals will not by itself remedy the extremely complex situation facing our world today. Isolated individuals can lose their ability and freedom to escape the utilitarian mindset,

³² John Paul II (2014): 15.

and end up prey to an unethical consumerism bereft of social or ecological awareness. Social problems must be addressed by community networks and not simply by the sum of individual good deeds.”³³

A somewhat logical consequence of waking the need to review the attitude of individuals and societies to the creation is the enumeration of human transgressions in this respect. It is to sharpen human sensitivity to the wrong and injustice committed by man (humanity) against the world of nature and provide greater motivation to eliminate misdeeds. Here, the notion of “ecological sin” worked out by theology appears here as extremely capacious and universal. Obviously, the notion of sin is strictly related to religious evaluation of human conduct. However, it seems sufficiently universal to be without a problem applied in a broadly conceived ecological discourse. In the most general sense, it means the destruction of balance between man and nature designed by the Creator. Man’s behaviour against the will of God and the mission to subdue the earth “making it subdued” received from Him (Genesis 1:28) is manifested in violence vis-à-vis the creation, its instrumental treatment and utilitarian objectification.³⁴ In consequence, it demolishes the order of the created world: harmony between man and the world, unity of human communities, finally also unity within man himself – always brings a destructive ferment into the structure of life and the world.³⁵

John Paul II notes that it always involves “harmful-use of creatures, whose laws and natural order are violated by ignoring or disregarding the finality immanent in the work

³³ Francis (2015): 219.

³⁴ Cf. Carbajo Nuñez (2019): 198.

³⁵ Cf. Conradie (2016): 19; Lértora Mendoza (2015): 202–221.

of creation. This mode of behavior derives from a false interpretation of the autonomy of earthly things. When man uses these things “without reference to the Creator,” to quote once again the words of the Council, he also does incalculable harm to himself. The solution of the problem of the ecological threat is strictly related to the principles of the “legitimate autonomy of earthly things” – in the final analysis, with the truth about creation and about the Creator of the world.”³⁶ Therefore, ecological sin is a fruit of human selfishness and lack of love for the world. It is underlay by the misunderstanding by man of his relation to the creation as well as his tasks in the world. Man is to be by God’s will a user of the world goods. However, when he misuses them out of greed and selfishness, indulging his unrestrained hedonism without heeding the negative consequences of his actions for other creatures, he commits evil, commits an ecological sin.

Making people mindful of the category of ecological sin in the individual and society-wide dimension seems to be a good impulse for awakening ecological consciousness, greater reflection on one’s behaviour, in particular responsibility for the consequences of one’s actions.

There is a need for finding a broader foundation for taking up efforts aimed at preventing degradation of the environment than the knowledge worked out by exact sciences in this respect. The most precise and competently formulated programmes for opposing degradation of the world of nature, “sounding the alarm” fail to bring about expected effects.³⁷ They rather scare so-called ordinary man but do not win him over, do not make him a convinced participant of pro-eco-

³⁶ Jan Paweł II (1986): 4.

³⁷ Cf. Babiński (2020): 29.

logical activities, an ally in the struggle for a common future. What is needed is motivation of a different kind, which would involve man internally.³⁸ A theologically profiled argumentation stands a chance to breed it.

Conclusion

Ecological issues constitute an important and constantly developed subject in the contemporary teaching of the Church as well as theological reflection. What is significant, it is not an exclusivist activity but is characterised by great openness towards the achievements of other sciences engaged in ecological issues. At the same time, it claims that its achievements be recognised as an important contribution to scholarly reflection in this respect. At the same time, it shows the significance of praxeological implications of its studies, which are aimed at awakening ecological consciousness as well and motivations to take up activities in this respect by concrete human individuals as well and communities.

It particularly strongly emphasises the moral and axiological dimension of human activeness and calls for restraining the still prevailing temptation to understand economic and technological development or progress in isolation from other areas that make up human existence. Worth noting is the importance of awakening man's responsibility for the good of the created world that God entrusted to him. Being its depositary, he is to use it being mindful of the value and dignity of creation, the respect that is due to it as it is the work of God.

³⁸ Cf. Scruton (2017): 8.

Ecotheology underlines a strict relationship between ecological and moral issues. The resolution of the latter at the time of the crisis of values cannot be successful without reference to anthropological issues. The theological proposal in this respect seems to be most balanced and creative. Avoiding anthropocentrism on one hand and specific biolatry on the other show that the idea of primacy of the human person is sensible when it is combined with the awareness of man's task to perpetuate and build common good encompassing not only humankind but all creation.

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