

Theology, Environment and Education for Peace

Luís Fernando Lopes¹

Thereza Cristina de Svoza Lima²

¹ *Graduated in Philosophy, Bachelor of Theology, Master and Doctor in Education*
Professor at UNINTER International University Center

¹ *Bachelor of Arts, Master and Doctor in Applied Linguistics*
Professor at the UNINTER International University

Abstract: This article aims to reflect on the relationship among Theology, Environment and Education for the Peace, considering, mainly, the fundamentals presented in the Encyclical *Laudato Si* of the Holy Father Pope Francis, published on May 24th, 2015. To achieve this objective, we started from some initial considerations on the relationship between Theology and Environment, including some reflection on ecological education and spirituality, to finally address the relationship Theology, Environment and Education for Peace. The fields of reflection and consequently of action of the theologian are expanding more and more today. In this sense, the relationship between Theology, Environment and Education for Peace has been gaining fundamental importance, since life in our common home demands education, care and respect. As Pope Francis points out, we are corporately constituted of the elements of our planet. We hope that the reflections presented in this essay may contribute to an awakening of the importance of caring for our common home, our Mother Earth, as well as for research in the theological field today.

1. Introdução

Although it is possible to find notes on ecology and the environment throughout the history of the Church in documents, in the life of great saints, such as Saint Francis of Assisi, for example, it is, above all, in the 20th century and more specifically from the 1990s onwards, that the theme becomes part of the so-called genitive theologies and is part of the contents that integrate the daily life of theological studies.

From this perspective, this work with the characteristics of an essay, aware of the limits that circumscribe the context of its authors, intends to reflect on the relationship between Theology, Environment and Education for Peace, considering mainly the foundations presented in the Encyclical *Laudato Si* of the Holy Father Pope Francis, published on May 24, 2015.

In order to achieve the proposed objective we have divided the text into three interdependent and complementary topics. In the first, we try to analyze, even if synthetically, the relationship between Theology and Environment. In the second, we try to focus on the relationship between ecological education and spirituality. Finally, in the third and last topic, we address the relationship between Theology, Environment and Education for Peace, pointing out ways for reflections and actions that promote an awakening on the importance of caring for our mother and sister Earth, our common home, which sustains us and from whose elements we are corporally constituted.

2. Ecological Education and Spirituality

Referring to the fact that nothing in this world is indifferent, Pope Francis in his Encyclical *Laudato Si* recalls the contributions of some of his recent predecessors on the theme of the environment related to the progress of humanity. Among other important questions, Pope Francis, quoting Benedict XVI, calls attention to the fact that "the degradation of nature is closely linked to the culture that shapes human coexistence" (Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si*, 06 and Encyclical Letter *Caritas in Veritate*, 51).

In this sense, it is fundamental to make humanity aware of the importance of caring for Earth, our common home. It is the very survival of humanity, as well as of the whole planet, that is in question. The exploitation, the unlimited degradation, the destruction, the waste of the planet's natural resources is not only an offense to God's creation, but an attack on humanity and on life on earth in general.

The term ecology was coined by German zoologist Ernst Haeckel from the Greek *oikos* "house, abode, dwelling" and *logia* "study", i.e. the science that deals with the relationship between living things and their environments¹.

¹ Source: <https://www.etymonline.com/word/ecology>. Access on 12/02/2020.

Pope Francis, in his encyclical *Laudato Si*, begins by calling the earth "our common home which can be compared sometimes to a sister with whom we share existence, or, sometimes, to a good mother who welcomes us into her arms" (p. 3).

And as such a house, where we live as a family united by bonds of brotherhood, it must be properly maintained and cared for the benefit of all who live here. That is the true ecology, the conservation and the work for the improvement of our common home given by the Creator, for the enjoyment and human development. As the Encyclical corroborates in showing the mistaken vision of the world in which we grow up:

This sister cries out against the evil we have done to her because of the irresponsible use and abuse of the goods that God placed in her. We grew up thinking that we were her owners and masters, authorized to plunder her (PAPA FRANCISCO, 2015, p. 3).

Such a goal can only be achieved by a means and by a foundation, an education and a spirituality directed towards it. This education must necessarily be directed to the conscious and philanthropic use of available resources, so that those who have little are not harmed by the greed of the holders of economic, political and social power.

It needs to be broad, ensuring a kind of knowledge that transcends personal experiences, and that stimulates empathy for humanity as a whole, and a great deal of respect not only for humans, but also for all creatures with whom we share the world, even the smallest and unpretentious.

It also needs to be profound, so that the knowledge acquired deliberately allows us to choose the best course of action, for us and for our brothers, giving us the necessary wisdom to do so, so that the solution proposed by us will neither be fruitless nor bring unforeseen negative consequences, caused by our own ignorance.

This spirituality is the one that recognizes the fraternal bonds that unite all humanity, as children of the same Creator, or even as participants of the same nature and of almost all of the same genetic code, originating from a single genealogical root, our most recent common ancestors.

It is based on the ethics of reciprocity, in which we recognize the other as someone worthy of respect in the same proportion as ourselves. It is the biblical commandment, "love your neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus, 19:18b)², which is at the center of the Holy Book of one of the oldest religions, namely Judaism, and which is repeated in all cultures around the world, even if we disrespect it in our fallibility.

Pope Francis reminds us that the Bible contemplates the human being as and only as a human being, independently of his religious, ethnic, and other associations, since the Creator has a special love for human beings, each in his individuality. According to St. John Paul II:

The Bible teaches us that every human being is created out of love, made in the image and likeness of God (cf. Gen 1:26). This statement shows us the immense dignity of every human person, who is not just something, but someone. He is capable of knowing himself, of possessing himself, and of freely giving himself and entering into communion with other people. St. John Paul II recalled that the very special love that the Creator has for every human being gives him an infinite dignity (PAPA FRANCISCO, 2015, p. 51).

The Christian faith is beyond its religious structure, that is, the commitment to the defense of the dignity of the human being and above all of the place where he lives, our land, is present in Christian principles.

²It is worth noting that the central principle of Judaism is summed up in this sentence. "The famous Hilel, the Elder, dictated this precept with other words: "Do not do to your companion what you do not want done to you. This precept also refers to the non-Israelite. The Torah, which is the source of human justice, could not teach love for some and revenge for others. The words that designate companion, neighbor and brother in the Torah are these: Rea, Amit, Bem-Am and Ach. Among these, the one that is susceptible to doubt and that defines only "the Israelite", is the word Ach, whose literal translation is brother. We see the same term in many places in the Bible, which was used to designate any man: (...) Jacob calls the unknown shepherds (brethren) without distinction of kinship and nationality Achim: "My brethren, where are you from?" (Genesis 9:5). For this reason, there is no doubt that the Torah, by citing these four terms, one after another (verses 17 and 18), wanted to designate any man, without distinction of race, color or creed. (FRIDLIN, 2017, p. 348)

All of those who are committed to defending people's dignity can find, in the Christian faith, the deepest reasons for such commitment. How wonderful is the certainty that each person's life is not lost in hopeless chaos, in a world governed by pure chance or by cycles that repeat themselves senselessly! The Creator can say to each one of us: "Before I formed you in your mother's womb, I already knew you" (Jer 1:5). We were conceived in God's prayer and, therefore, "each one of us is the fruit of God's thought. Each one of us is dear, each one of us is loved, each one is necessary". (PAPA FRANCISCO, 2015, p. 52)

The words of Pope Francis show us this concern for the uniqueness of the individual, the importance of each one's role in maintenance, welfare and the act of being necessary on our planet. That is, each one must take responsibility for their actions and their impacts on the environment in which we live.

The harmony between the Creator, humanity and the whole of creation has been destroyed because we have sought to take God's place, refusing to recognize ourselves as limited creatures. This fact has also distorted the nature of the mandate to "dominate" the earth (cf. Gen 1:28) and to "till it and keep it" (cf. Gen 2:15). As a result, the harmonious relationship between human beings and nature has become a conflict (cf. Gen 3:17-19). (PAPA FRANCISCO, 2015, p. 52).

This conflict is due to the rupture between the three explicit relationships in the Genesis narratives, namely: "the relationships with God, with neighbour and with earth" (PAPA FRANCISCO, 2015, p. 52). This rupture turns into sin, which breaks with the relational structures inside and outside us, manifesting itself in conflicts and various types of violence.

It is therefore significant that the harmony lived by St. Francis of Assisi with all creatures was interpreted as a healing of that rupture. St. Bonaventure said that, through universal reconciliation with all creatures, Francis had somehow returned to his original state of innocence. Far from this model, sin is manifested today, with all its force of destruction, in wars, in various forms of violence and abuse, in the abandonment of the most fragile, in attacks against nature (PAPA FRANCISCO, 2015, pp. 52-53).

In Genesis, it is said that there is an invitation to "dominate" the earth (Gen. 1:28), in this term we must interpret it as a conscious and caring domination, in the sense of preserving and maintaining what has been given to us, nature, the source of our survival and our descendants, that is, future generations.

While "cultivating" means ploughing or working a field, "guarding" means protecting, caring, preserving, watching over. This implies a relationship of responsible reciprocity between the human being and nature. Each community can take from the goodness of the land what it needs for its survival, but it also has the duty to protect it and ensure the continuity of its fertility for future generations (PAPA FRANCISCO, 2015, p. 53-54).

Thus, it makes sense to say that "the earth belongs to the Lord" (Ps 24/23:1) and "the earth and all that is in it" (Deut 10:14). In this way, God takes away from us every pretension of absolute possession of the earth. This responsibility for the earth places a commitment on the human being to care for and watch over the land entrusted to him, so that the laws of nature are respected and that a balance is maintained in the relationships between nature, God and men.

The Catechism, very directly and insistently, calls into question a disordered anthropocentrism: "Every creature possesses his own goodness and perfection. The different creatures, dear to their own being, each in his own way, reflect a spark of God's infinite wisdom and goodness. That is why man must respect the goodness of every creature, to avoid the disorderly use of things. (PAPA FRANCISCO, 2015, pp. 54-55)

Pope Francis brings in his words the figure of the Catechism to illustrate this disordered and unbalanced character in which society lives with the use and maintenance of the natural richness of our earth, since every creature has his fundamental role in keeping things in an orderly flow.

Many things must readjust their own course, but first of all it is humanity that must change. There is a lack of awareness of a common origin, a mutual belonging and a future shared by all. This basic awareness would allow the development of new convictions, attitudes and lifestyles. Thus, a great cultural, spiritual and educational challenge arises which will imply long processes of regeneration. (PAPA FRANCISCO, 2015, p. 155)

In a way, we could understand that the Original Sin of Catholic Catechism would be this loss of balance between humanity and God, humanity and nature and humanity and itself. An ecological education and spirituality would therefore be a way to restore that initial condition of harmony. And this is precisely the challenge that arises and which is urgently needed in our days.

3. THEOLOGY, ENVIRONMENT AND PEACE EDUCATION

The ecological harmony that we must desire and continually seek for must begin with inner peace, that is, with inner harmony. An adequate respect for oneself, and a state of inner peace is what allows the human being to adequately respect others, the environment and God.

It is interesting to note that the Hebrew word shalom, peace, has as its root the word shalem, which means something intact and complete. We can only achieve this integrity by recognizing our limitations and imperfections, and by rejoicing in this recognition.

This is a typical spiritual practice in Christianity as well as in other religions. In the words of Pope Francis (2015):

Christian spirituality proposes a growth in sobriety and an ability to rejoice with little. It is a return to simplicity that allows us to stop to savor the little things, to give thanks for the possibilities that life offers without clinging to what we have or saddening ourselves for what we do not have. This requires avoiding the dynamics of domination and the mere accumulation of pleasures. (PAPA FRANCISCO, 2015, p. 169)

It is a matter of living in harmony and in agreement with ourselves, with the people and with the world around us, and thus "contemplating the Creator, who lives among us and in what surrounds us and whose presence does not need to be created, but discovered, unveiled" (PAPA FRANCISCO, 2015, p. 171).

We speak here of an attitude of the heart that lives everything with serene attention, that knows how to remain fully present before a person without thinking about what will come after, that gives itself at every moment as a divine gift that must be lived in fullness. Jesus taught us this attitude when he invited us to look at the lilies of the field and the birds in the sky, or when, in the presence of a restless man, "looking at him, he felt affection for him" (Mk 10:21). He was certainly fully present before every human being and every creature, thus showing us a way to overcome the unhealthy anxiety that makes us superficial, aggressive and uncontrolled consumerists. (PAPA FRANCISCO, 2015, p. 171)

But for this, it is necessary that we do not put our ego in God's place, thinking that our subjectivity is capable of defining good and evil, but rather accept that there is a morality that transcends our desires, pleasures and displeasures.

By recognizing our position in the world, without overestimating or underestimating ourselves, we achieve inner peace, which silences our impulses and allows us to listen with greater attention to the words of love that the Creator wrote in his work, that is, it implies a lifestyle, as the Pope shows us in his words:

Caring for nature is part of a lifestyle that implies the ability to live together and to share. Jesus reminded us that we have God as our common Father and that this makes us brothers. Fraternal love can only be free, it can never be a payment to

others for what they have done, nor an advance for what we hope they will do. That is why it is possible to love our enemies. This same gratuity leads us to love and accept the wind, the sun or the clouds, even though they are not subject to our control. Thus we can speak of universal brotherhood. (PAPA FRANCISCO, 2015, p. 172)

This way, we can live every moment naturally, without longing for what we do not possess, nor sadden ourselves for what we have lost, but rather deeply appreciating every moment and every experience we have, and everyone and everything we are involved with.

We have to feel again that we need each other, that we have a responsibility to each other and to the world, that it is worth being good and honest. We have lived in moral degradation for a long time, forgetting ethics, goodness, faith and honesty; the time has come to recognize that this joyful superficiality has served us little. Such a destruction of the whole foundation of social life ends up placing us against each other in the defence of our own interests, provokes the awakening of new forms of violence and cruelty, and hinders the development of the true culture of care for the environment. (PAPA FRANCISCO, 2015, p. 173)

This act of feeling that we need each other is precisely what we need to feel again, as expressed in the words of the Pope quoted, because only then will we recognize that it is worth being good and honest. In this way, it is necessary to have love, and love for the society in which one lives, because in love there is the expression of caring gestures. Only in this way can we speak of an integral ecology, that harmony between the parties. As the example of Saint Therese of Lisieux shows:

The example of Saint Therese of Lisieux invites us to put into practice the little journey of love, not to miss the opportunity of a kind word, of a smile, of any small gesture that will sow peace and friendship. An integral ecology is also made of simple daily gestures, by which we break the logic of violence, exploitation, selfishness. (PAPA FRANCISCO, 2015, p. 173).

The journey of love, if it is not the only possible one, is one of the most viable for an education for peace, because it is civil and political.

Love, full of small gestures of mutual care, is also civil and political, manifesting itself in all actions that seek to build a better world. Love of society and commitment to the common good are an eminent form of charity, which touches not only relationships between individuals, but also "macro-relations such as social, economic, political relationships". (PAPA FRANCISCO, 2015, p. 173).

It is then necessary to revalue social love, which is the main tool for a more human and strategically harmonious society, a "civilization of love," as expressed by Pope Francis, a proposal presented by the Church.

Social love is the key to authentic development: "To make society more human, more worthy of the person, it is necessary to revalue love in social life - politically, economically and culturally - making it the constant and supreme norm for action". In this context, together with the importance of small daily gestures, social love urges us to think of great strategies that effectively stop environmental degradation and encourage a culture of care that permeates the whole of society. When one recognizes God's vocation to intervene together with others in these social dynamics, one must remember that this is part of his or her spirituality, it is the exercise of charity and, in this way, it matures and is sanctified. (PAPA FRANCISCO, 2015, p. 174).

Thus, an education for peace is to promote the care of oneself and of others and of the environment in which one lives, of the history that is transmitted, of the common good, transforming spiritual experiences by knowing, in a collective conscience, that we must take care of what God has entrusted to us, our home.

4. Considerações Finais

In view of what has been presented so far, we can consider that we would do nothing more than what is necessary to play our role in the world in caring for what has been entrusted to us, for we are part of all that integrates the universe, and thus we cannot see ourselves as isolated beings, but as individual beings and integrated with that whole. This whole that is our common home, whose Creator entrusted the care to us.

To educate for peace is to try to awaken individuals to face the destruction that is being caused to our common home. An immediate awakening is necessary so that the consequences we are already suffering and experiencing are not even more disastrous for the place entrusted to us by the Creator.

For this, it is necessary to understand in the words of Francis of Assisi, that Nature, the Earth, is our mother, as well as our sister, and that we are all brothers within her, even if in order to love our neighbour as ourselves it is necessary to love ourselves as we are, without overestimating our condition, putting ourselves in God's place, nor underestimating, ignoring or despising our humanity. This is our role as guardians, responsible for the social and environmental harmony of our world.

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