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An Ecological Theology of Liberation: Empowering Ecological Advocacy

Karl M. GASPAR CSsR
Manila, PHILIPPINES

Introduction

Of almost a hundred million people who constituted the population of the Republic of the Philippines, around 16 million Filipinos living in 14 provinces located along the typhoon 's route suffered the brunt of super-typhoon Haiyan when it made a landfall in various islands in the central part of the country on 8 November 2013. Battered by the 378 km/hr winds thousands of Filipinos across the six central regions experienced the tragic consequences of a major catastrophe.

This is most especially true in the islands of Samar and Leyte, specifically Tacloban City and the towns of Tanauan and Palo. As estimated by the National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council (NDRRMC) 6,268 individuals died in the aftermath of Yolanda, with 28,689 persons injured. Until today, there are still 1,069 persons who remain missing.

The poverty statistics issued regularly by the National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA) across the different regions, show that Region VIII (which include Samar-Leyte), is one of the poorest in the country. In 2012, the poverty incidence was 63.7% in Eastern Samar and 43.0% in Southern Leyte.

The impact of Haiyan was that it made the already poor people more destitute. This is most certainly true for those relying on fishing and farming, especially the coconut farmers. Yolanda damaged 3.3 million coconuts across 295,191 hectares of land affecting one million farming households. With around 30,000 boats damaged by the storm and crucial fishing equipment such as nets and cages smashed, fisherfolks are desperately hoping they could find livelihood assistance.

Located beside the vast waters of the Pacific Ocean, the Philippines is one of the most vulnerable countries in terms of the occurrence of typhoons or cyclones. On an average, 26 typhoons hit the Philippines every year.

The rise of ecological consciousness

Long before the rise of ecological consciousness in the past twenty years with the popularization of data related to global warming and climate change , there had been a gradual rise of resistance on the part of sections of the Filipino people to development projects – usually decided on by multinational corporations with support from State agencies – that were seen as impacting people's lives. During the martial rule years under the Marcos dictatorship (1970s-1980s), various development projects were being aggressively pushed, allegedly to benefit the population. In fact, these only benefited the corporations, as well as Marcos and his cronies.

To generate more electricity, the State planned to set up a number of giant dam projects involving the Chico River in the Mountain Province north of Manila, Lake Sebu and Pulangi River in central Mindanao and the expansion of dams along the river that flows out of Lake Lanao. The Lake Lanao and Pulangi sites succeeded despite the opposition from various groups, but those of the Chico River and Lake Sebu were stopped by the strong resistance of local communities supported by civil society agencies including Church groups.

Towards the end of the martial rule, there arose a movement to stop all logging operations in Mindanao. When President Cory Aquino took over as President, local communities in various parts of Mindanao staged people power barricades to stop logging operations.[1] These were the Base Ecclesial Communities (BECs) organized in the post-Vatican II Local Church of Mindanao through the Mindanao-Sulu Pastoral Conference mainly composed of rural peasants who relied on waters flowing from watersheds to their rice paddies. Through the years, they had noticed how the rivers were affected by the logging operations. When the State refused to heed their call to stop the logging, they took to the streets and barricaded the roads so logging trucks could not bring the cut logs to the ports in the coastal cities.

The people in their BECs were supported by members of religious congregations who had missions in the upland areas including the Columbans, Redemptorists and Scarboro Missionaires. This ecological grassroots movement drew the attention of the members of the Catholic Bishops' Conference in the Philippines (CBCP) which made them issue a historic pastoral letter, the first to arise of any Bishops' Conference in the world. Issued on 29 Janury 1988, it was entitled - What is happening to our beautiful land?

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[1] These took place in Midsalip, Zamboanga del Sur and San Fernando, Bukidnon. See Karl M. Gaspar, *A People's Option: To Struggle for Creation*.

A theology arising as ecology becomes a pastoral priority

Among other things, this statement attempted to reflect the cry of the people as they saw nature being damaged. They referred especially to the cry of the indigenous people who had seen the destruction of their world at close range. It pointed to the exploitative mentality as the root of the problem which they saw was in variance with Jesus' Gospel. They commented that this attack on the natural world benefited only a very few Filipinos. They warned that the rapid destruction of the very base of the living world endangered its fruitfulness to benefit future generations.

For them, this assault on creation was sinful and contrary to the teachings of the Christian faith. They asked the people not to ignore and disregard the Earth. They reminded them that God will hold everyone responsible for plundering it and leaving it desolate. They ended their statement with these words: "We reap what we sow; the results of our attitude and activities are predictable and deadly. There is an urgency about this issue which calls for widespread education and immediate action."

Despite the end of martial rule, the residue of the military dictatorship remained. The peasants who barricaded the streets were not only harassed and threatened with arrest and imprisonment. When they persisted with their people power, they were attacked by the military at the barricades. The security guards of the logging companies were also mobilized to harass those who persisted in their campaign to end all logging operations. Fr. Nery Lito Satur, a young diocesan priest of the Diocese of Malaybalay, who was at the center of this campaign, was killed on 14 October 1991 allegedly by armed guards of a logging company backed up by the military. His martyrdom sparked more mobilizations which strengthened the call for the State to implement a logging moratorium.

When bishops, religious and lay leaders came together for the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines in Manila two years later, they issued its Acts and Decrees. The Filipino members of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) echoed the same theological reflection.

> *A Filipino theology of creation springs from involvement in liberation struggles - whether against economic exploitation, political repression, gender oppression, ethnic discrimination or ecological destruction – is necessarily an integrated one. It is in touch with the movement of the Holy Spirit not only in the people's lives but in the whole of creation. It is rooted in our Christian faith tradition and at the same time aware of our animist rootings which consider sacred our soil, forests and rivers, which are concerned with concrete bodily needs while caught up in the spirit world, which have produced a richness of popular symbols and rituals.* [2]

[2] Ligo, Arche and Virginia Fabella, eds., *Dugo-Duga ng Buhay (Vital Sap of Life)* 1995, p. 15.

EATWOT has not ceased of draw attention to ecological issue, as can be viewed at its theological journal VOICES of the Third World: http://eatwot.net/VOICES EATWOT has also dedicated some of its assemblies and meetings to the same issue.

Earlier, the World Council of Churches (WCC) assemblies dealt with ecological realities. In Vancouver in 1983, they pointed to the need for Christians to be engaged in actions to promote Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation. In May 1994, it published a statement on global warming with a document entitled – Sign of Peril, Test of Faith, Accelerated Climate Change. In 2002, they came up with another document on climate change – Solidarity with victims of Climate Change – pointing to the extreme weather conditions caused by climate change that was costing a fortune. Eventually, the Church's central Magisterium also issued pastoral exhortations and other documents. Catholic social teaching that tangentially dealt with ecological issues already appeared in 1971 with Pope Paul VI's two documents—Octogessima Adveniens and Justitia in Mundo. The Pope critiqued the exploitative model of development and the unjust economic systems that promoted extreme inequalities.

However, it was John Paul II who would advance the Magisterium's exhortations dealing with ecology. During his papacy's twenty-seven years, he issued four important documents, namely, Redemptor Hominis (1979), Laborem Exercens (1981), Sollicitudo Rei Socialis (1987), and Centesimus Annus (1991) which all mentioned the need to deal with the environmental issues. Also in Centesimus Annus.

On 1 January 1990 he issued the document – Peace with God the Creator, Peace with all Creation – which called attention to the moral and religious dimension of the environmental crisis. He posited that "modern society will find no solution to the ecological problem unless it takes a serious look at its life style." On 17 January 2001, in a statement he referred to the ecological reality as a "catastrophe" and called for an ecological conversion for everyone.

In 1989, the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) issued an FABC Paper No. 54 with the title Peace, Justice and the Integrity of Creation." In 2004, the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church's Chapter on Safeguarding the Environment echoed many of John Paul II's ecological exhortations.

His successor, Pope Benedict XVI, continued this ecological advocacy in the encyclical Caritas in Veritate (2009), containing four sections on environmental concerns. His message for the 2010 World Day of Peace was also devoted to the theme, If You Want to Cultivate Peace, Protect Creation.

Since 2000, many other church groups and institutions dealt with Ecology during their gatherings. In its annual convention in 2007, the

Catholic Biblical Association of the Philippines (CBAP) centered its theme on the Bible and Ecology. In 2010, the Damdaming Katoliko sa Teolohiya (DAKATEO), which is the Catholic Theological Society of the Philippines, chose Reimaging Christianity for a Green World as the theme for its theological reflections. In its seventh General Assembly at Yogyakarta (Indonesia) in April 2012, the EATWOT released a strong statement on Ecological Vision and Planetary Survival.

More theologians would write on this theme, too. Holman wrote: "Ours is a project of hope for a better future: that God's creation will be treated with reverence, that the poor will be better off and that we will be living more true to ourselves and to what God has created us to be – one family, living in solidarity with one another and many generations yet to come."[3] O'Brien reminded us that God created the earth and passed on the responsibility to us to care for this earth. But, "we have seriously neglected this important responsibility. It is now time to restore a more sustainable relationships with out environment, so that all human beings have the opportunity to live in dignity."[4]

A theologian who has extensively written his reflections on the Theology of Creation is the Columban Sean McDonagh. In one of his documents, he posits that the Christian tradition is to be blamed for the worsening ecological crisis. He quotes the historian White: "…(W) e shall continue to have a worsening ecological crisis until we reject the Christian axiom that nature has no reason for existence but to serve man…. Both our present science and technology are so tinctured with orthodox Christian arrogance towards nature that no solution for our ecological crisis can be expected from them alone."[5]

McDonagh finds this ironic considering that "the biblical tradition gave rise to people like St. Benedict of Nursia whose monks cared for the land and did so much to revolutionize agriculture in Medieval Europe; it also gave rise to St. Francis of Assisi who saw all creatures as neighbours and part of the family of God… and it nurtured Hildegarde of Bingen – a remarkable woman, poet, mystic, musician, painter, herbalist and counsellor to popes and kings (whose) … poetry pulsates with a rapturous, sensuous love for the earth, full of ardour and passion."[6]

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[3] Holman, Michael. "The Amazon Changed me." *The Tablet*, 5 December 2009, pp. 10-11.

[4] O'Brien, Keith. 2009. "Stewards of Creation." *The Tablet*, 19 September 2009, pp. 6-7.

[5] Lynn White, US historian, in a lecture to the American Association for the Advancement of Science in 1966. In Sean McDonagh's, "Consuming the Earth in a Few Decades". January 2010

[6] McDonagh, Sean. *Ecology and the Bible*. 2010.

A Filipino theologian, Rey Raluto has recently proposed that for the Philippines, the theology of creation model is one that he labels "the emerging ecological theology of liberation".[7] As a theologian, he continues to challenge theology practitioners to be part of a movement to develop a non-anthropocentric perspective on liberation. This move is meant to critically appropriate the ecological insights of both the emerging Earth sciences as well as the ecological worldviews of the indigenous peoples.

Raluto expands the view of liberation so that it encompasses the structurally oppressed class of poor people, the culturally excluded indigenous peoples, the sexually dominated women, and the ecologically exploited earth. A preferential option for the poor thus becomes more inclusive of all that which is marginalized. It leads to the insight that the being of creatures is relational on both the horizontal and vertical frames. Injustices do not just fall from the sky; oppression arise within the context of relationship impacting human society and the planet at the local and global levels.

Finally, Raluto posits that "the Kingdom of God must be treated with absolute importance…The normativity of God's Kingdom serves as the central hermeneutic mediation in our construction of an ecological theology of liberation. In fact, from a Christian perspective, our struggle for human and ecological liberation becomes meaningful only when it is done in view of our hope for the coming of God's Kingdom—the total salvation of the whole creation." [8]

Twenty years after their landmark pastoral letter, the members of the CBCP issued another very strong statement – Upholding the Sanctity of Life, issued on 5 November 2008.

In his statement on 5 June 2014 which celebrated World Environment Day, Pope Francis has sustained the ecological stances of the two previous Popes.

My own journey towards an ecological faith praxis

Having worked with indigenous peoples and rural poor communities, mainly in the southern part of the Philippines, I have been immersed among the poorest of the poor. I have shared their lives, listened to their stories, engaged in their struggles and participated in various pastoral programs aimed at responding to the issues – socio-economic-political ,

[7] Raluto, Rey. Raluto Rey. "To Struggle for Human and Ecological Liberation, Towards an Ecological Theology of Liberation in the Philippine Context." 2010.

[8] Ibid.

cultural and ecological – affecting the most disenfranchised communities. I have been a witness to how the poor have suffered because of their poverty and powerlessness, the neglect of the State who have continued to ignore their plight, and lately, owing to the impact of climate change.

I have been engaged in campaigns and programs of non-government organizations and the Church in the fields of human rights, alleviating poverty, engaging in issues linked to justice, peace and the integrity of creation. I have also been privileged to listen to their cry and lamentations. I have been touched by their deep faith in God's providence and compassion. Despite their poverty, they continue to trust and depend on God's love for them. They are convinced that God is Creator of everything in creation and that we all share the responsibility of loving one another as well as the whole creation. This is why they can so easily be convinced of the need to work for social and ecological issues.

On the part of the indigenous peoples, I have been very moved by their wholistic view of their cosmic religion, namely, that everything in the universe is inter-related. There is a wholeness in their respect and appreciation of creation; their believe in their Deity is such that nothing - human beings, forests, the soil, animals, trees, etc. – is to be considered useless and have no purpose. All are intertwined, and thus, we should do our best to protect them from being destroyed.

I share many of the beliefs and commitments of the poor to reverse what used to be the dominant discourse of most people, namely, that the world was created for peoples and that human beings can just decide what to do with the environment. We have to change this mentality that has led to ecological destruction and which has provided the loggers, miners, construction firms, fruit plantation companies, with the power to be the ones to solely decide on what to do with nature. We should view the whole universe from the lens of those who have been provided by God with the wisdom to value the integrity of creation.

My own awareness of the ecological crisis and my faith commitment to help protect Mother Nature only arose in the late 1980s when I was immersed among peasants opposed to the continuing logging operations in their locality. Through the years, I deepened this commitment in advocating for the end of aerial spraying in the fruit plantations and destructive open-pit mining. These engagements have not been easy as we've been faced with powerful enemies, greedy corporate firms supported by a corrupt government with a military-police machinery supporting the interests of the elite. But I continue my ecological commitment because:

As a Christian, I fully believe that taking a preferential option for the poor today also means taking a preferential option for creation, since the ones who suffer the most from the ecological crisis are the poor.

As a Christian, I fully believe that all of God's people have a right to a fullness of life. Today in terms of the context of all kinds of crises including the ecological one, there is fullness of life if we are able to contribute to a movement that will eventually provide what the poor needs in the context of their biological, physical, social, cultural, faith and ecological concerns. All these cannot be attained if the whole of creation is fragmented, disrupted and destroyed. The fullness of our life necessarily require the full integrity of creation which is the locus of God's love for the whole of humanity.

As a Christian, I fully believe that God's gift of salvation for humanity is situated within God's gift of creation. We cannot be saved only from the perspective of a dream of a heaven beyond life and beyond this earth. We are also saved in the here and now, in the joys and pleasures that we are able to enjoy with the people, communities and persons we love. But these expressions of joys and pleasures are brought about by the beauty, goodness and generosity of the universe which is our abode and the locus of our being creatures of the one Creator. As a Christian we show compassion for the rest of humanity – people of various races, genders, creeds, cultures, faith traditions, ages, social classes, ethnicities – by doing the little we can so that the whole of humanity are not made to suffer in a world characterized by pollution, diseases and suffering brought about by ecological damnation. Instead, that we are able to do the little we can to provide humanity with a world that was truly God's gift to all of us, an earth that manifests God's love and generosity because it is an earth that mirrors creation when it first appeared in the horizon before human beings began to destroy it.

A choice of life or death, blessing or curse

When super-typhoon Haiyan struck the islands of central Philippines on 8 November 2013, the members of the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer were gathered together with their Father General from Rome at a retreat house in Cebu City. We were having a conference on our congregation's missiological thrust for the Asia-Pacific Region. We shared on how we were going to be more relevant to the needs of this Region in the years to come. Haiyan showed us one of the paths we need to follow as the new normal for us in the Philippines is the occurrence of mega-disasters.

We have a parish in Tacloban City at ground-zero of Haiyan. The church was filled with 3,000 survivors of the typhoon that brought a storm surge that drowned thousands of residents in the city and the nearby coastal areas. We immediately organized a relief program to assist the survivors distributing food, potable water and other urgent needs of the people. We also set up medical teams to take care of the wounded

and sick. Within a month, we had a missionary team composed of our confreres, lay associates and formands who went to the affected areas to assist the survivors. From our parish in the city, we moved to the affected villages in the outlying coastal areas. We were to spend four months among the survivors who found temporary shelters in wherever there could be a place for them to stay from churches to tents to temporary dwellings. The impact of the catastrophe was widespread; the devastation was so severe. Thus, there was so much that needed to be done.

We conducted various activities in these villages. As we visited their homes, we listened to the people's stories of struggle and survival. In many cases, the retelling of the stories brought tears as the survivors continued to process their grief and sorrow at the death of so many relatives. As many families lost not just one but a few members of their families, it was heartbreaking to listen to their narratives of survival. As they were sharing their stories, they were engaged in the self-healing of their trauma.

Our presence among them and the mere act of just listening to their narratives brought relief for which the people were grateful. Many had received relief goods and material assistance from various groups and agencies but we usually were the first to spend time listening to their stories in their homes and to provide them a listening ear as well as words of consolation. We did family rituals in these homes that helped to assuage their fears and anxieties as well as bless their newly built shelter. We also visited the sick, persons with disabilities and senior citizens.

As thousands died in the areas we covered. we conducted various liturgical celebrations and rituals to commemorate the event, remember the dead and to pray for the living. Masses for the dead were celebrated; at the start of the Mass we read the list of names of victims. We did blessings and cleansing of spots where dead people were deposited for a while before the dead bodies were brought to the mass graves. We also conducted these rituals at the mass graves where thousands of people were hastily buried days after they perished in the deluge.

We also facilitated psycho-social-spiritual integration (PSSI) sessions with children (7 to 12 years old) and the youth (13 above) giving special attention to those who lost significant elders of their families and clans. We had feeding programs during these sessions as the kids go hungry during these kind of sessions. We also had PSSI sessions for adults, separating the mothers from the fathers. These sessions always ended with either a Eucharistic celebration or rituals to provide solace to their sense of guilt, grief and desperation. We also raised resources for the rehabilitation needs of the people as we supported efforts in the areas of housing, provision of livelihood possibilities and income-generating projects.

This four-month experience with the survivors of Haiyan has further strengthened my resolve to sustain my engagement in ecological advocacy and action in the Philippines. Within the church circles, I continue to help popularize the emerging ecological theology of liberation for Filipinos. However, in the post-Haiyan, my engagements have taken on a greater urgency having experienced the enormity of the impact of a mega-disaster.

Indeed, we have only one choice and it has to be a choice for life and for blessings as we seek to do our share in the promotion of the integrity of creation.

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