

**LAUDATO SI GENERATION:
YOUNG PEOPLE CARING FOR OUR COMMON HOME**
**International Conference on the 4th Anniversary of *Laudato Si'*
and the 5th Anniversary of CYNESA.**
(UNEP, Nairobi, 15th-16th July 2019)

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Your Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
and My Dear Young People,

I am delighted to address this important gathering, and thank you for the kind invitation. I would like to congratulate the Catholic Youth Network for Environmental Sustainability on celebrating its fifth anniversary, an important milestone in an inspiring journey to mobilize young Catholics in Africa to care for creation. I would like to thank the United Nations Environment Programme for hosting us in their very “house”, and the “Faith for Earth” Desk of the UNEP, in particular, for their support in the organization of this Conference. It is an inspiring sign to see the United Nations, an institution which plays such a critical role in coordinating the response of the human family to the ecological crisis, partnering with civil society and faith communities and Church organizations to protect our fragile planetary home. I would also like to thank the World Wildlife Fund and several individual benefactors for their generosity to support this convening. Thank you so very much.

The contribution of *Laudato Si'*

It is a great joy to celebrate with you the fourth anniversary of *Laudato Si'*, the landmark encyclical letter of the Holy Father Pope Francis on care for our common home. In *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis invited us all, to “enter into dialogue with all people about our common home” (*Laudato Si'* 3). It is precisely the spirit of our meeting. As members of the common human family, we are here to reflect on the precarious state of our common planetary home, and to articulate concrete responses to heal and rebuild it.

As outlined in *Laudato Si'*, the ecological crisis we face is complex and multifaceted, so I would like to focus on two problems that are particularly worrisome and are of great relevance for this dear African continent: the climate crisis and the biodiversity crisis. Recent reports of the United Nations about

these two issues are a wakeup call that remind us, once again, of the severity of the state our common home. They are two expressions of “the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor” (*Laudato Si'*, 49) that we are hearing all around us.

The cry of the climate

In October 2018 the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released its stark “Special Report on the impacts of global warming of 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels”, building on the latest scientific research about the implications of the Paris Agreement goal. As the Holy Father said in a recent speech, “that [IPCC] Report clearly warns that effects on the climate will be catastrophic if we cross the threshold of 1.5°C outlined in the Paris Agreement goal.” Pope Francis went on to say that we face a “climate emergency” which could turn into “a brutal act of injustice towards the poor and future generations.”¹ The strong words of the Holy Father are an unequivocal call to respond to the warnings of the scientific community.

I like to say that the 1.5°C threshold is a threshold in different dimensions. First, “the 1.5°C threshold is a critical physical threshold, inasmuch as it would still enable the avoidance of many destructive impacts of climate changes caused by man, such as the regression of the main glaciers and the destruction of the majority of tropical coral reefs.”² The planet is quickly approaching a breaking point and we cannot allow this threshold to be trespassed. Second, “the 1.5°C threshold is also a moral threshold: it is the last chance to save all those countries and many millions of vulnerable people who live in coastal regions.”³ We cannot allow this injustice to occur. Those who contributed the least to this crisis should not be the ones paying the highest price. Lastly, “it is useful to assume that 1.5°C is also a religious threshold. The world we are destroying is the gift of God to humanity, precisely that house sanctified by the divine Spirit (*Ruah*) at the beginning of creation, the place where he pitched his tent among us (cf. *Jn 1: 14*).”⁴ We should not dishonour our Creator by throwing away the precious gift of creation that we received.

As Pope Francis reminded us, “time is running out! Deliberations must go beyond mere exploration of what *can* be done, and concentrate on what *needs* to be done. We do not have the luxury of waiting for others to step forward, or of prioritizing short-term economic benefits. The climate crisis requires ‘our decisive action, here and now’ (*Laudato Si'*, 161).”⁵

The Cry of the earth’s species

¹ Address to Participants at the Meeting for Executives of the Oil and Natural Gas Sectors (14 June 2019).

² “Choosing again what is good”, Message by Card. Turkson to the scientific community (24 May 2019).

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Address to Participants at the Meeting for Executives of the Oil and Natural Gas Sectors (14 June 2019).

Similarly, another stark U.N. report recently put the biodiversity crisis in the spotlight. In May 2019 the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) confirmed the accelerating loss of biodiversity, quantifying that up to one million animal and plant species are at risk of extinction due to human activity. One million is a terrifying number. That is the reason why scientists describe this crisis as the sixth mass extinction event, one that is solely driven by one species: humans.

Pope Francis laments this tragedy and frames it as a lethal blow to the cosmic choir of creatures praising God: "Because of us, thousands of species will no longer give glory to God by their very existence, nor convey their message to us. We have no such right." (Laudato Si' 33). Moreover, he also frames it as an injustice towards future generations: "Each year sees the disappearance of thousands of plant and animal species which we will never know, which our children will never see, because they have been lost for ever" (Ibid. 33).

The time to address the biodiversity crisis is now. The summit of the U.N. Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) to happen in Kunming, China, on October 2020, will be a critical milestone in our collective effort to come up with a "global deal for nature". Scientists are calling for that international agreement to enshrine as a global goal the protection of at least 30% of the planet's ecosystems by 2030 and 50% by 2050.⁶ This is essential not only for mitigating the sixth mass extinction event we are undergoing, but it also is essential for achieving the Paris Agreement goal of 1.5°C, as natural habitats also have an irreplaceable role as a carbon sink that can absorb the carbon pollution plaguing our atmosphere.

At the same time, special attention should be given to protecting the rights of indigenous communities, who usually are the peoples inhabiting the most biodiverse regions of the planet. As the Holy Father said, "although they represent only 5% of the world's population, they look after about 22% of the earth's landmass. Living in areas such as the Amazon and the Arctic, they help protect approximately 80% of the planet's biodiversity".⁷ Most importantly, "for them, land is not a commodity but rather a gift from God and from their ancestors who rest there, a sacred space with which they need to interact if they are to maintain their identity and values" (Laudato Si' 146).

The protection of natural habitats and indigenous peoples stands a meaningful chance of being enshrined at the China summit on biodiversity, but vocal support is needed from all sectors of society. The Church is committed to playing her part in raising awareness and advocating for action, while accompanying local communities with their struggles in the ground. The upcoming Synod of Bishops for the Pan-Amazon Region, to happen in October 2019, will be a critical milestone in that journey.

⁶ "A Global Deal For Nature: Guiding principles, milestones, and targets", [Science Advances](#), April 2019.

⁷ Address to Participants at the Conference on "Religions and SDGs" (8 March 2019).

The cries of the climate and species in Africa

As Pope Francis describes it in *Laudato Si'*, “nature [is] a magnificent book in which God speaks to us and grants us a glimpse of his infinite beauty and goodness” (12). The African continent, very dear to my heart, is one of the most amazing chapters of that book. The beauty of the African landscapes and biodiversity is overwhelming. Ranging from the southern tip of Cape Agulhas to the shores of the Mediterranean Sea, Africa is a joyful and diverse feast of life.

But our continent is particularly vulnerable to the climate and biodiversity crises. On one hand, the “cry of the climate” is already proving devastating to many African countries. Pope Francis emphasized in *Laudato Si'* the particularly vulnerable position of Africa: “The warming caused by huge consumption on the part of some rich countries has repercussions on the poorest areas of the world, especially Africa, where a rise in temperature, together with drought, has proved devastating for farming” (51).

The encyclical goes on to say that “water poverty especially affects Africa where large sectors of the population have no access to safe drinking water or experience droughts which impede agricultural production” (28). In turn, “greater scarcity of water will lead to an increase in the cost of food and the various products which depend on its use. Some studies warn that an acute water shortage may occur within a few decades unless urgent action is taken” (31). The related desertification issue in sub-Saharan Africa is becoming increasingly worrisome, although there are promising efforts, such as the “Great Green Wall”, which have the potential to significantly mitigate the problem if all sectors and nations work collaboratively.

On the other hand, the rich biodiversity of the African continent is suffering greatly on different fronts. The numbers of Africa’s iconic large mammals, such as the rhinos, elephants and gorillas, are declining rapidly because of poaching and other human activity, being a cause for grave concern. At the same time, the beautiful tropical rainforests of central Africa are suffering greatly from deforestation, mining projects and oil drilling. These forests “possess an enormously complex biodiversity which is almost impossible to appreciate fully, yet when these forests are burned down or levelled for purposes of cultivation, within the space of a few years countless species are lost and the areas frequently become arid wastelands” (*Laudato Si'* 38). The Pope refers to the Congo basin as one of “those richly biodiverse lungs of our planet which... we know how important these are for the entire earth and for the future of humanity” (*ibid.*).

An example of worrisome destruction of African rainforests is taking place very near from here, in Uganda. Large oil projects are being undertaken in the

country's beautiful national parks, such as the Murchison Falls National Park on the Nile headwaters, endangering those amazing biodiverse forests and the local communities. At the same time, these worrisome projects also exacerbate the climate crisis, which led Pope Francis to express big concern about the fact that "investments in fossil fuels continue to rise, even though scientists tell us that fossil fuels should remain underground... We still reckon as profit what threatens our very survival".⁸

The role of young people

Yet there are so many signs of hope. God is raising up people around the world to come together to care for our fragile common home. I am especially happy to note the role of young people in this journey, given that so many of you are here today in this room celebrating CYNESA's anniversary. As it is written in *Laudato Si'*, "young people demand change" (*Laudato Si'* 13), as it is you young people who will be the most affected by the climate crisis. Pope Francis added that you, "future generations, stand to inherit a greatly spoiled world. Our children and grandchildren should not have to pay the cost of our generation's irresponsibility."⁹ Your frustration and anger towards our generation is clear and understandable.

What is remarkable to observe is that the youth mobilizations have acquired unprecedented strength since the "Climate Strikes" were ignited by the 15-years old activist Greta Thunberg last August, with millions of students striking during the past two "Global Climate Strikes". The healthy pressure by the student mobilizations is being noticed by politicians, who are the ultimate decision makers that need to show the political courage that is needed to fully implement the Paris Agreement. I am encouraged about the participation of young Catholics in these mobilizations given the urgency of the situation.

Our Dicastery was honored to support the launch of the *Laudato Si'* Generation at World Youth Day in Panama, which included the announcement of a prophetic manifesto. I am very pleased by the emergence of the *Laudato Si'* Generation, an international network of Catholic youth organizations -of which CYNESA is a member- striving to "live *Laudato Si'*". It is such a fitting name, as you are the generation that will be remembered for being marked by *Laudato Si'* and, most importantly, you are the generation that will be remembered for helping the Church implement *Laudato Si'* to be more prophetic and coherent in her vocation to care for our common home.

You give me hope! I urge you to continue your commendable efforts through the *Laudato Si'* Generation and beyond, building networks of solidarity both inside the Church and with the larger civil society movement for the care of our common home. The world needs more of your prophetic witness to denounce

⁸ Address at Meeting with Finance Ministers from Various Nations (27 May 2019).

⁹ Address to Participants at the Meeting for Executives of the Oil and Natural Gas Sectors (14 June 2019).

the intergenerational injustice that is underway and demonstrate that change is possible. As the Pope said in a remarkable speech at World Youth Day: “Hagan lío en las diócesis”, which means “make a mess in the dioceses” in Spanish, hoping to push the Church out of her comfort zone. I invite you to make your voices heard louder in the coming months, as the heads of state who will gather in the U.N. Climate Action Summit need to feel the pressure from young people and society at large. Please keep up your good work, preaching and embodying “the good news” of *Laudato Si’*.

An ecumenical and interreligious journey

I am particularly happy that ours is also an ecumenical and interreligious gathering. “It is most encouraging that concern for the future of our planet is shared by the Churches and Christian communities, together with other religions.”¹⁰ As Pope Francis reminds us: “Religions play a very important role in this task of promoting care and respect for the environment, especially in this integral ecology. Faith in God leads us to know Him in his Creation, which is the fruit of his Love for us, and it calls us to look after and protect nature. Thus it is necessary that religions promote a true education, at all levels, which will help to spread a responsible and receptive attitude to the need to care for our world.”¹¹

Conclusion: the need for a true ecological conversion

I give praise to God that young people and Africa are leading the transformation that humanity needs to take care of our imperiled planetary home. Any true transformation will be possible only with a true ecological conversion, a true change of heart (*metanoia*) as individuals and communities. I pray that abundant fruit of “ecological conversion” may come out of this gathering, both in Africa and globally, to reverse the growing crisis that is afflicting our common home, our fragile and beautiful home.

In closing, I would like to quote the bishops of Southern Africa, who were also quoted in *Laudato Si’*: “Everyone’s talents and involvement are needed to redress the damage caused by human abuse of God’s creation”.¹² I and our Dicastery look forward to continue working together with you all.

Thank you.

¹⁰ “Show Mercy to Our Common Home”, Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for the Celebration of the WORLD DAY OF PRAYER FOR THE CARE OF CREATION (1 September 2016)

¹¹ Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to Participants in the Symposium Sponsored by the Organization of American States and by the Institute for Interreligious Dialogue of Buenos Aires (8 September 2016).

¹² SOUTHERN AFRICAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS’ CONFERENCE, Pastoral Statement on the Environmental Crisis (5 September 1999).

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