

## **Jubilee 2025: Remission of the Ecological Debt**

In recent decades, the concept of *ecological debt* has emerged as an effective means of interpreting environmental injustices on a global scale.

Traditionally, the term ‘debt’ has been associated with the financial condition of many developing countries indebted to industrialised economies. However, this perspective overlooks a fundamental aspect: throughout history, on the one hand, the most industrialised countries have been responsible for the largest share of greenhouse gas emissions, which has contributed to the well-known phenomenon of global warming, and on the other hand, they have also built their prosperity through the intensive exploitation of natural resources in developing countries, often to the detriment of local communities and ecosystems.

It is precisely this imbalance that has led many to believe that developing countries are owed a real and specific *ecological credit* by the more industrialised countries, which should at least partially offset the financial debt they are burdened with. In light of this, a concrete step could be to introduce mechanisms to restructure this debt. This would recognise the existence of two interconnected forms of debt that mark our time: one economic, the other environmental. Such mechanisms could be further developed as part of the necessary reform of multilateral financial systems, in order to contribute to poverty eradication and the protection of creation.

Picking up on the Jubilee tradition of debt forgiveness, Pope Francis relaunched, in the *Bull of Indiction of the Jubilee 2025*<sup>1</sup>, the call for debt forgiveness for the poorest countries, seeking a new global international financial architecture that recognises the ecological credit due to developing countries.

### **Financial debt and ecological debt: ‘two sides of the same coin’**

*A true ‘ecological debt’ exists, particularly between the global north and south, connected to commercial imbalances with effects on the environment, and the disproportionate use of natural resources by certain countries over long periods of time. (Laudato si, n. 51).*

Financial and ecological debt today represent two profoundly intertwined dimensions, to the point that they are ‘two sides of the same coin, mortgaging the future’<sup>2</sup>. Both reflect unbalanced power relations between the North and the South, rooted in a long history of inequality, exploitation, and structural dependencies.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Pope Francis, [Bull of Indiction of the Ordinary Jubilee of the Year 2025, \*Spes non confundit\*](#), 9 May 2024.

<sup>2</sup> Pope Francis, [Message to COP29 on climate, Baku](#), 11 November 2024.

The debt crisis that afflicts most developing countries today has its roots in the legacy of colonialism. Many states, after gaining independence during the 20th century, found themselves confronted with longstanding debts and were obliged to resort to new borrowing to secure essential services and basic infrastructure. This has generated a chronic dependence on the principal international financial institutions, fuelling the so-called *debt trap*: a vicious circle in which the repayment of interest drains fundamental public resources that ought to be allocated, for example, to basic services such as health and education, hindering any real possibility of autonomous development. It should also be noted that, while many developing countries were already in unsustainable debt situations before COVID-19, since then, the intertwining of crises - pandemic, climate, inflation - and conflicts has aggravated this situation. According to UNCTAD data, between 2004 and 2023, the public debt of developing countries quadrupled from USD 2,600 billion to USD 11,400 billion<sup>3</sup>.

In parallel, a complex 'ecological debt' has accumulated that is difficult to quantify. Among the main elements are the different responsibilities of states in contributing to global warming, particularly in relation to their historical emissions, which vary significantly between individual countries and groups of countries. Nearly 80 per cent of cumulative historical emissions from fossil fuels and land-use change comes from G20 countries, with the largest contributions from China, the United States of America and the European Union, while the least developed countries together have contributed 4 per cent<sup>4</sup>.

This figure highlights profound inequality in the distribution of both the causes and the effects of climate change. Hence, the Holy See's oft-repeated appeal that it would be right to find appropriate ways to forgive the financial debts that weigh upon various peoples, given the ecological debt owed to them.

The populations least responsible for the climate crisis are now also those suffering its most severe consequences. Water scarcity, loss of biodiversity, pollution and forced displacement caused by extreme weather events and the progressive deterioration of ecosystems particularly affect communities in the global South, already marked by deep structural vulnerabilities. Lacking the economic and infrastructural resources necessary to adapt or react, these populations face the highest costs of a crisis they did not help generate.

The green and digital transition is a further major factor that aggravates the ecological debt. Although presented as a sustainable response to the environmental crisis, this technological and industrial transformation risks replicating - rather than overcoming - the extractive logic and structural inequalities that have historically marked relations between the global North and South. In fact, the increase in global demand for critical raw materials generates new extractive pressures, largely concentrated in the territories of the global South, which often lack adequate environmental and social protections. Entire ecosystems are compromised to feed production chains that supply the markets of richer countries, which

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<sup>3</sup> Cr. UNCTAD, News, 17 March 2025, <https://unctad.org/news/debt-crisis-developing-countries-external-debt-hits-record-114-trillion>.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. UNEP, Emissions Gap Report 2023, [https://www.unep.org/interactives/emissions-gap-report/2023/#section\\_0](https://www.unep.org/interactives/emissions-gap-report/2023/#section_0)

continue to reap the main economic benefits, while the environmental and human cost falls on local communities.

### **Understanding the meaning of the ecological debt: a perspective of justice, responsibility and solidarity**

The growing unsustainability of debt is one of the structural issues feeding economic and social inequalities at a global level. For this reason, the Catholic Church has repeatedly drawn attention to this issue, recognising its profound human, social and moral implications.

Ever since the Jubilee of 2000<sup>5</sup>, and with renewed urgency in this Jubilee of Hope<sup>6</sup>, the Church has requested debt forgiveness for the poorest countries; not as an act of generosity and solidarity alone, but as a demand for justice, based on an awareness of systemic imbalances and profoundly asymmetrical economic relations between industrialised and developing countries. In this context, the teaching of Pope Francis has given new prominence to the concept of *ecological debt*, integrating it into the Church's social thought as an ethical and political key to analysing historical responsibilities linked to the climate crisis. This recognition calls not for charity, but for accepting the need to correct structural injustices and overcome unsustainable development models.

The Church's commitment to the recognition of the ecological debt thus translates into a concrete invitation to build a new alliance between peoples, based on deeply reformed economic rules and their link to other essentials integral to human development: care for creation, environmental justice and the promotion of peace. Integrating all these calls into play various principles of the Social Doctrine of the Church, such as the principles of: promotion and sharing of the *common good*; *responsibility* also in general and with respect to new lifestyles and models of production and consumption; *social justice, solidarity, subsidiarity, participation*; *intra- and inter-generational equity*; *safeguarding and care of creation*; *prudence and precaution*; *access to primary goods - including education about integral ecology*; *the universal destination of the goods and fruits of human activity*.

### **Pastoral orientations**

The celebration of the Jubilee renews the ancient biblical awareness of the need for new beginnings, in the guise of restitution and redistribution, ransom and liberation. The remission of debts, the release of prisoners, the reallocation of land are symbols of a justice that reflects God's sovereignty on earth, a power of life that expands breath and horizons. The human propensity to accumulate, compete and assert one's own interests is thus opposed to a deeper human need to recognise the debt that each person owes to the Creator and creatures, without whom nothing would exist. The Encyclical Letters *Laudato si'* and *Fratelli tutti* have restored the central focus on the interdependence which each individual and each human community depends. Everything calls out for a profound change of course, and this challenges the

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Saint John Paul II, [Bull of Indiction of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 Incarnationis mysterium](#), 29 November 1998, n. 12, and [Apostolic Letter Novo millennium ineunte](#), 6 January 2001, n. 14.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Pope Francis, *Spes non confundit*, n. 16.

consciences of believers and non-believers alike; as well as the heart, as emphasised in Pope Francis' last Encyclical Letter, *Dilexit nos*: 'It is only by starting from the heart that our communities will succeed in uniting and reconciling differing minds and wills, so that the Spirit can guide us in unity as brothers and sisters. Reconciliation and peace are also born of the heart'<sup>7</sup>.

This is the background against which the intertwining of financial debt and ecological debt acquires pastoral importance. Let the local Churches of the most industrialised and developing countries commit to grow in awareness, to consolidate bonds of reciprocity and mutual aid, and to position themselves prophetically in the public debate. Indeed, nowadays in many countries, there is increasing attention to major issues that challenge growth models, wealth concentrations and legal contradictions, suggesting the need for courageous paradigm shifts. The paradigm of integral ecology, fraternity and social friendship demands the application of the Social Doctrine of the Church in diverse contexts and real challenges to which people are exposed at every level in this historical crossroads. A paradigm that can nourish a profound 'personal and communitarian'<sup>8</sup> integral ecological conversion, which, besides requiring the conscious and responsible participation of individuals and communities, entails for Christians 'letting all the consequences of the encounter with Jesus emerge in their relations with the world around them'<sup>9</sup>.

When we strive to consolidate bonds of knowledge and cooperation between local Churches of the world, and especially taking advantage of the ease with which new technologies allow meetings between people and groups -- this is a fundamental expression of catholicity and synodality. Young people in particular deserve to be placed at the centre of a new missionary season. Accordingly, Pope Leo XIV invites us to 'reflect together on a possible remission of public debt and ecological debt', urging us to 'be builders of bridges of integration [...] working for ecological, social and environmental justice.'<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Pope Francis, [Encyclical Letter Dilexit nos](#), n. 28.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Pope Francis [Encyclical Letter Laudato si'](#), n. 216

<sup>9</sup> Pope Francis, *Encyclical Letter Laudato si'*, n. 217

<sup>10</sup> Pope Leo XIV, [Videomessage on the Occasion of the Meeting of around 200 Universities in Rio de Janeiro on \*Laudato si'\*](#), Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro (PUC-Rio), 20-24 May 2025.