

Sharing God's Earth: A Christian Vision of the Environment, Justice and Human Flourishing

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Let me begin with some words from Scripture. From the sixth chapter of Micah:

He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God (Micah 6:8).

In this passage, the prophet Micah, addressing the covenant people of God in the midst of the injustices and violence of 8th century Judean society where political oppression and economic exploitation was rife, asked a most crucial question, one which remains ever so pressing today: 'What does the Lord require of you?' The answer, supplied in the very same verse, is crystal clear: 'to act justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly before God'. To 'act justly' has negative and positive implications and connotations. Negatively, it is to avoid oppressing our fellow human beings, especially the weak and the vulnerable. Positively, it is a call for a sense of responsibility towards others and to ensure that their basic rights are not violated.¹ Justice, however, must be always be tempered with mercy, which includes compassion, love and kindness, if society is to truly flourish. Only when we learn to 'walk humbly' *Coram Deo*, that is, with or before God, can we treat our neighbours with justice and mercy. For to 'walk humbly' in this context means to be ever so mindful of the needs of our neighbours and to be willing to be at their service.² Such service requires a measure of sacrifice, which in turn is possible only with self- forgetfulness and denial in the interest of the welfare of our fellow human beings.

The question posed by the prophet Micah – What does the Lord require of you? – continues to haunt us as we reflect on the conflicted issue of justice in our sin-

¹ Leslie Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*. The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 373.

² Walter Bruggemann, 'Walk Humbly With Your God, Micah 6:8', *Journal for Preachers*. 33/4 (2010), 14.

marred world. The answer that this passage supplies continues to be relevant as we reflect more specifically on the issue of environmental and economic justice (or injustice). For our reflections to be fruitful and our actions to be truly community-building, however, we must take seriously the answer in verse 8 in its entirety. Justice, rights, individual liberties, important as they may be, is only half the story. By themselves they are unable to ensure the flourishing of the human community. Only when justice is wedded to mercy, rights to duties and liberties to responsibilities can human communities truly thrive.

This talk is divided into two unequal parts. In Part One, I clarify what I mean by environmental justice and its relationship with economic justice. In Part Two, I discuss, albeit very briefly, some of the important issues and topics that are crucial to any reflection on environmental justice, such as human rights, the common good and the concept of justice itself. But I do so from the Christian perspective with the firm conviction that the rich theological and spiritual tradition of the Church can address some of the deficiencies in the secular accounts and offer fresh insights to perennial questions. I conclude with some brief remarks on how issues of injustice can be addressed through the ‘dialogue of action’, which the Church can and should engage with other faith communities and the State. What is attempted here is the sketching out of the Christian social imaginary that is undergirded by Scripture and tradition on the one hand, and that takes seriously secular and philosophical proposals on the other.

ENVIRONMENTAL AND ECONOMIC JUSTICE

Part One: What is environmental justice? What are some of the burdens and concerns of its advocates?

Perhaps a brief look at the background of what some scholars have rightly called the environmental justice *movement* and some associated events would prove instructive. While there is no consensus regarding its genesis, some scholars, like Alice Kaswan, a noted environmental law and policy scholar and law professor at the University of San Francisco, believe that the environmental justice movement began in 1982, in North Carolina. In that year, an African-American community opposed a potentially hazardous waste landfill placed in the midst of their neighbourhood. This famous case was the catalyst for numerous studies on the distribution of environmental hazards.³ Other scholars are of the view that the drive for environmental justice is part of a larger movement in America that addresses issues surrounding Native Americans, labour, and traditional environmental problems.⁴ An earlier movement, dated in the 1970s, which may

³ See Alice Kaswan, ‘Environmental Justice: Bridging the Gap between Environmental Laws and “Justice”’, 47 AM. U.L.REV. 221, 225-28 (1997).

⁴ Jonathan Augustine, ‘Environmental Justice and Eschatology in Revelation’, Loyola Law Review, Vol 58, 2012, 341.

have contributed to environmental justice advocacy is the Anti-Toxic movement, an advocacy initiative which ‘represents communities that resisted and organised against hazardous waste facilities, landfills and incinerators’.⁵ All these prominent developments in recent American history give us an idea of what environmental justice addresses and the nature of its concerns, which fundamentally has to do with certain sectors of the population being exposed to environmental hazards that may seriously impair their health and sense of wellbeing.

Environmental justice discourse therefore must be distinguished from that of traditional environmentalism because it understands the ‘environment’ in a particular way. In contrast to traditional environmentalism, environmental justice sees the environment not just as physical space or locality that must be conserved or protected but as a place where people live, work and play.⁶ We may say that environmental justice combines both the eco-centric and anthropocentric conceptualisations of the environment and sees it as a biosphere in which human beings inhabit. The environment is ‘the complex of natural objects and forces’ within which human beings live and which ‘both limits and supports’ human development.⁷ Environmental justice advocates have therefore criticised traditional environmentalism for failing to appreciate the environment in the way that people – especially minorities and the poor – actually experience it. According to the United Church of Christ’s Commission on Racial Justice (UCC) Report published in 1987, there is a definite correlation between racial minorities communities and proximity to commercial hazardous waste facilities.⁸ Evidence also show that industrial facilities emitting pollutants are often placed at low-income residential areas.⁹ Due to their proximity to these sites, these populations suffer environmental hazards that adversely affect their health, making them more prone to illnesses such as cancer, respiratory problems, injuries to the immune system and, in some extreme cases, genetic defects.¹⁰ In most cases, these populations do not benefit from the economic development that resulted from these industries.

Environmental justice is therefore based on the recognition that there exist serious disparities among people with regard to cost and benefits distribution. But before we proceed further, I would like to make an important point in relation to ethnicity and race. When the movement first started as a result of the 1982 case in North Carolina mentioned above, ‘environmental justice’ was almost always equated with ‘environmental racism’. However, as I have briefly pointed out, while the

⁵ Marina de Oliveira Finger and Felipe Bortoncello Zorzi, ‘Environmental Justice’, UFRGS MUN / UFRGS Model United Nations Journal, Volume 1, 2013, 224.

⁶ Penn Loh, ‘Environmental Justice’. In *Encyclopaedia of Immigrants Health*, Sarah Loue and Martha Sajatovic (eds), (Berlin, Heidelberg: Springer Science+Business Media, 2012), 624-626.

⁷ J. Alder and D. Wilkinson, *Environmental Law and Ethics* (London: MacMillan, 1999), 8.

⁸ Finger and Zorzi, ‘Environmental Justice’, 342.

⁹ Luke Cole and Sheila Foster, *From the Ground Up: Environmental Racism and the Rise of the Environmental Justice Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 2001).

¹⁰ David Pellow, ‘Social Inequalities and Environmental Conflict’, *Horizontes Antropológicos* 12(5), 2006, 15-29.

population that has often to bear the brunt of environmental hazards in most cases belong to a certain racial or ethnic group, there are cases where sectors that are subjected to the same injustices are more racially mixed. Thus, the term 'environmental racism' is of limited utility because environmental justice also concerns communities that are not racially or ethnically homogenous. However, insofar as environmental justice addresses cost and benefits distribution, it is a call for equality, which is itself a problematic ideal, as we shall see later in this talk.

But environmental justice has to do with more than the distribution of costs and benefits among certain sectors of society. It also has to do with the political voice of the affected communities, their chances of being heard. Low-income and minority communities do not always have the capacity to influence government decisions and public policy. As Finger and Zorzi have pointed out, "Their political invisibility prevents them from posing their demands and needs to politicians. These populations are highly excluded from formal political mechanisms (like political parties) and informal ones (like advocacy groups)."¹¹ These communities therefore are less able to pursue their rights or even to ensure that enacted laws are properly (justly) enforced. Consequently, industries continue to place their toxic facilities in the midst of these communities thinking that because there have not been serious objections from these communities the arrangement does not pose any serious problems to them. Additionally, in failing to attend to the concerns of these communities, the State has also in an important sense failed to guarantee the rights of these poor and affected neighbourhoods,¹² thereby putting the conflicted issue of rights at the very centre of debates concerning environmental justice. We will take up the question of human rights later in this talk. All this indicates that the concerns that environmental justice raises look and sound very much like those associated with social justice, itself a controversial concept.

In light of the above discussion, the Office of Environmental Justice of the USEPA has, in my view, provided a good and fairly comprehensive description of environmental justice and its concerns:

[Environmental justice is] the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, colour, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies. Fair treatment means that no group of people, including a racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic group should bear a disproportionate share of the negative environmental consequences resulting from industrial, municipal, and commercial operations or the execution of federal, state, local and tribal programmes and policies. Meaningful involvement means that (1) potentially affected community residents have an appropriate

¹¹ Finger and Zorzi, 'Environmental Justice', 227.

¹² The World Bank. *World Development Report 2004: Making Services Work for Poor People* (Washington: World Bank, Oxford University Press, 2004).

opportunity to participate in decision about a proposed activity that will affect their environment and / or health; (2) the public's contribution can influence the regulatory agency's decision; (3) the concerns of all participants involved will be considered in the decision-making process; and (4) the decision makers seek out and facilitate the involvement of those potentially affected.¹³

How is environmental justice related to economic justice?

In his encyclical *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis spoke of the relationship between the environment, the economy and society. This relationship, writes the Pontiff, 'entails reflection and debate about conditions required for the life and survival of society, and the honesty needed to question certain models of development, production and consumption'.¹⁴ This means that issues concerning environmental injustices are profoundly and inextricably interwoven with economic inequality, poverty, discrimination, unemployment and the like. Based on what I have said so far about the placement of polluting facilities in certain neighbourhoods and communities, it is not difficult to see how poverty and environmental justice issues are related. Once an industrial facility producing toxic waste is placed in a particular locality or neighbourhood, the land prices there tend to plunge. This means that that particular piece of real estate will attract people of a certain income bracket, who cannot afford to live elsewhere, and it would drive away the wealthier segment of the population who have more choices.¹⁵ Thus goes the vicious circle! Free market proponents would argue that these people live in those neighbourhoods because they have chosen to do so. But not only is that blatantly false, it is also a stubborn refusal to recognise the problem for what it is. In similar vein, employees who work in hazardous environments are those who have low skill and educational levels, and, statistically, belong to minorities and low-income populations.

Environmental and economic justice issues, then, converge at the question of poverty, a problem that is not only generally becoming more acute but one which is extremely complex, shaped by the historical, social and economic milieu of a particular country, city or neighbourhood. Although definitions of poverty abound, the most straightforward way to describe it is the 'lack of sufficient resources for a

¹³ U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA), Final Guidance for Incorporating Environmental Justice Concerns in EPA's NEPA Compliance Analyses', 1998, Washington D.C.: USEPA. <https://www.epa.gov/sites/production/files/2015-04/documents/ej-guidance-nepa-compliance-analyses.pdf>. (accessed 29 November 2019).

¹⁴ *Encyclical Letter Laudato Si' of the Holy Father Francis: On Care for Our Common Home*, para. 138. https://w2.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si-en.pdf.

¹⁵ See Edward Lao Rhodes, *Environmental Justice in America: A New Paradigm* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003).

decent life'.¹⁶ Poverty is a complex phenomenon because of its many guises and also because it is not isolated from other problems such as discrimination, inequality and racism. It would therefore be quite wrong to generalise by simply associating poverty only with a certain group of people or a certain dependent underclass, just as it would be a mistake to see poverty only in relation to unemployment. Many people with paid jobs are poor because their wages could not lift them out of their predicament. However, although I have said that we should not associate poverty only with a certain group of people such as ethnic minorities, the fact remains that statistically they are the most vulnerable. In America, for example, while one out of every nine white Americans is poor, one of every three blacks and Native Americans and one of every four Hispanics is poor.¹⁷

As I have mentioned earlier, poverty is not an isolated problem and can only be understood when we examine it alongside issues related to economic inequality and social discrimination. Again, it is impossible to speak of disparities in the distribution of wealth and income concretely in a general way, as countries vary and each would have its own degree of economic inequality. But I think it is true to say that in many developing and developed countries, the gap between the rich and the poor is widening. While it is important to recognise the fact that this gap must be narrowed, it is also important to acknowledge that not all forms of inequality are unnatural or unjust. It is important to see that inequality is a fact of economic life, and that some forms of inequality are in fact quite just as it signals the fair distribution of income based on abilities, skills, productivity and work ethic.¹⁸ Having said that, extreme inequalities can be detrimental to the development of a society, especially in terms of fostering solidarity and communal responsibility among its members. It can exacerbate the kind of environmental and economic injustices that I have been describing.

Environmental and economic justice issues are not just confined to the level of local communities or a particular nation. They are issues that affect countries globally, and have profound ramifications for the relationship between wealthier and poorer countries. At the global level, environmental and economic justice issues relate to degraded environments that have detrimental consequences to the health of communities to food security to the disproportionate consequences and effects of climate change. Very often, these problems and issues are tied to international activities and irresponsible cross-border actions that have caused tensions between neighbouring countries. There are striking similarities between the pattern of environmental and economic injustices at local and global levels. As

¹⁶ United States Catholic Bishops, *Economic Justice for All: Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy*, 1986. https://uscb.org/upload/economic_justice_for_all.pdf.

¹⁷ U.S. House of Representatives Subcommittee on Oversight and Public Assistance and Unemployment Compensation, Committee on Ways and Means, *Background Material on Poverty* (Washington, D.C., October 1983).

¹⁸ See Roland Chia, 'Mind the Gap'. <https://ethosinstitute.sg/mind-the-gap/>.

Finger and Zorzi have pointed out, ‘Developed countries ... treat underdeveloped ones in the same way as the State and industries treat low-income communities’.¹⁹ In addition, there is also the North-South dimension of international environmental and economic justice that has generated considerable debate. Developed countries have contributed not just to environmental degradations but also to environmental injustices due to their overconsumption of natural resources. As Finger and Zorzi explain:

Poor countries ... are the ones which suffer the most, even if their historical contribution to the environment degradation is much smaller. Vulnerable geographical locations, lack of resources to adapt to climate change and to respond to environmental disasters, and lack of administrative infrastructure to control waste disposal, logging, mining, and petroleum development are some of the disadvantages which add to this disproportionate burden.²⁰

And just as minorities and poor communities do not have a voice in the debates concerning their own wellbeing, poorer countries in the global South also have little say on international policies on the environment as the North dictates decision-making in the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, the World Trade Organisation (WTO), and other multilateral fora.

TOWARDS A CHRISTIAN VISION

As we turn now to Part Two of the talk, to reflect on how Christians and the Church ought to respond to the issues that we have been discussing, I would like to propose that we view this response as an instance of Christian public theology. What do I mean by the term ‘public theology’? What are its concerns and how do we establish its scope? There is a sense in which all Christian theology is a form of public discourse. This is the point made many years ago by University of Chicago’s David Tracy in a once influential book entitled *The Analogical Imagination*. ‘All theology’, Tracy writes, ‘is public discourse’.²¹ Theology, Tracy stresses elsewhere, ‘is distinctive among the disciplines for speaking to and from three distinct publics: academy, church, and the general culture’.²² There is a profound sense in which this is correct. If the Gospel is indeed public truth, as Leslie Newbigin has reminded us, then theology, which is the Church’s reflection on the meaning and implications of the Gospel must itself be seen as public discourse. Speaking more specifically about the ‘public’ aspect of public theology, Paul Chung, in his book *Postcolonial Public Theology* defines public theology as ‘a theological-philosophical endeavour to provide a broader frame of reference to facilitate the responsibility of

¹⁹ Finger and Zorzi, ‘Environmental Justice’, 229.

²⁰ Finger and Zorzi, ‘Environmental Justice’, 231.

²¹ David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 3.

²² David Tracy, ‘The Role of Theology in Public Life: Reflections’, *Word and World*, (1984) IV:3, 230.

the church and theological ethics for social, political, economic, and cultural issues. It investigates public issues, developing conceptual clarity and providing social-ethical guidance of religious conviction and response to them'.²³ Although this is indeed a helpful definition, it is the description that Duncan Forrester offers in his famous essay 'The Scope of Public Theology' that is, in my view, most comprehensive:

[Public theology is] theology which seeks the welfare of the city before protecting the interests of the Church, or its proper liberty to preach the Gospel and celebrate the sacraments. Accordingly, public theology often takes 'the world's agenda', or parts of it, as its own agenda, and seeks to offer distinctive and constructive insights from the treasury of faith to help in the building of a decent society, the restraint of evil, the curbing of violence, nation-building, and reconciliation in the public arena, and so forth. It strives to offer something that is distinctive, that is, the gospel, rather than simply adding the voice of theology to what everyone is saying already. Thus, it seeks to deploy theology in public debate, rather than a vague and optimistic idealism which tends to disintegrate in the face of radical evil.²⁴

Because public theology seeks 'the welfare of the city' and because it should take 'the world's agenda' as its own, it cannot shy away from issues related to environmental and economic justice. But if public theology is not simply to add 'the voice of theology to what everyone is saying already' but must offer something distinctive, namely, the Gospel, it should boldly present the Christian vision of how society ought to be ordered and speak critically and prophetically against the ideologies, policies, political structures and systems that stand in the way of human flourishing. In what follows I would like to offer some reflections on the distinctive insights that the Church can bring to the table in the current discourse on environmental justice. More specifically, I would like to discuss three areas: (1) the concept of justice itself, (2) the preoccupation with rights language to the neglect of duties and responsibilities, and (3) the idea of solidarity and the common good. I will end the talk with some reflections on the importance of collaboration. This includes inter-faith collaborations as well as the collaboration between the church and the government, where this is possible.

An Anatomy of Justice

We turn firstly to the conflicted question of justice, a concept that has been subjected to intense debate in the last few decades. The universal presence of the call for justice is evidence that it is an ever-present issue, signalling the continuing

²³ Paul S. Chung, *Postcolonial Public Theology: Faith, Scientific Rationality and Prophetic Dialogue* (Eugene OR: Cascade Books, 2016), 1.

²⁴ Duncan Forrester, 'The Scope of Public Theology', *Studies in Christian Ethics* (2004), 17(2), 6.

prevalence of harm, exploitation and oppression in our world. If we were to transpose this into the idiom of Christian theology, we would say that the cry for justice is a recognition – direct or tacit – of the reality of human sinfulness. In his highly acclaimed book *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Reinhold Niebuhr defines sin as ‘man’s wilful refusal to acknowledge the finite and determinate character of his existence’.²⁵ Niebuhr describes the human ego, which envisions itself rather than God as the centre of existence, as ‘sin in its quintessential form’.²⁶ Because of the fall, human beings are so ‘curved in upon themselves’ (*homo incurvatus in se*), as Augustine would say, that they fail to regard the interests of others. ‘Therefore’, writes Niebuhr, ‘all human life is involved in the sin of seeking security at the expense of other life. The perils of nature are thereby transmuted into the grievous perils of human history’.²⁷ The cry for justice is a recognition that the way that things are is not the way that they ought to be. It is a recognition of the selfishness and greed that trample upon human dignity and that destroy human relationships and fractures society – the failure to value one another and accord each other with basic respect.

In the Christian tradition, justice is always a relational concept, a cardinal moral virtue that shapes our relationship with God and neighbour. Thus, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* defines justice as:

... the moral virtue that consists in the constant and firm will to give their due to God and neighbour. Justice toward God is called the ‘virtue of religion’. Justice toward men disposes one to respect the rights of each and to establish in human relationships the harmony that promotes equity with regard to persons and the common good. The just man, often mentioned in the Sacred Scriptures, is distinguished by habitual right thinking and uprightness of his conduct towards his neighbour.²⁸

In contemporary discourse, where a plethora of theories of justice jostle for attention and subscription, this broad understanding of justice, derived from Scripture and tradition, should frame Christian reflection on environmental and economic justice. Some scholars of environmental justice have taken the taxonomic approach²⁹ to discuss justice issues related to the environment,

²⁵ Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man, Volume 1* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1941), 177.

²⁶ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Beyond Tragedy: Essays on the Christian Interpretation of History Today* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1937), 11.

²⁷ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol. 1.*, 182.

²⁸ Catechism of the Catholic Church,

https://vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p3cs1c1a7.htm.

²⁹ See R. Bullard, *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class and Environmental Quality* (Boston: Boulder Colo Westview Press, 1996); A. Kaswan, ‘Environmental Justice: Bridging the Gap between Environmental Laws and Justice’, *The American Law Review*, 1997, 47(2), 221-300; D.E. Taylor, ‘The Rise of the Environmental Justice Paradigm: Injustice Framing and the Social Construction of Environmental Discourses’, *American Behavioural Scientist*, 200, 43(4), 508-580; J. Ikeme, ‘Equity, Environmental Justice and Sustainability: Incomplete Approaches in Climate Politics’, *Global Environmental Change*, 2003, Volume 13, 195-206.

economy and community, an approach which, in my view, has many merits. These scholars maintain that the ‘justice’ in environmental justice has at least four aspects: distributive, procedural, corrective and social. An entire talk can be devoted to unpacking these different aspects of justice. We can only discuss them very briefly here.

I think many of us would be familiar with the concerns of distributive justice. As we have seen, environmental justice issues are based on the fact that environmental benefits and burdens have been inequitably distributed to certain groups of people, especially minorities and the poor. The adverse effects of environmental problems are rightly seen as by-products of industrialisation, pollution and locally undesirable land use (LuLus) such as waste landfills. Distributive environmental justice addresses these concerns. More specifically, distributive justice, according to Robert Kuehn, focuses on ‘fairly distributed outcomes, rather than process for arriving at such outcomes’.³⁰ The second aspect of environmental justice – procedural justice – deals more directly with the process, that is, the way in which environmental decisions are made and who gets to participate in such decisions. According to Pamela Towela Sambo,

Procedural justice refers to the manner in which a decision has been made, discussing on the fairness of the decision-making process rather than on its outcome. Procedural justice is widely recognised as the process through which (substantive) justice is seen to be done, and it focuses on ‘equal concern and respect’ in the political decision of how to distribute goods and advantages.³¹

The third aspect of environmental justice is corrective justice, which according to Robert Kuehn has to do with ‘fairness in the way punishment for law-breaking is assigned and damages inflicted on individuals and communities are addressed’.³² In the literature, corrective justice is also referred to as ‘retributive’, ‘compensatory’, ‘restorative’ and ‘commutative’ justice. And the fourth aspect of environmental justice is ‘social justice’ which is defined as ‘that branch of the virtue of justice that moves us to use our best efforts to bring about a more just ordering of society’.³³ This aspect of environmental justice is very important because it refuses to reduce the deliverance or execution of justice to legislation or formal public policies and rightly insists that it is fundamentally the responsibility of every member of the society, including the people running businesses and industries.

³⁰ Robert R. Kuehn, ‘A Taxonomy of Environmental Justice’, *Environmental Law Reporter*, 2000, Volume 30, 10631-10632.

³¹ Pamela Towela Sambo, ‘A Conceptual Analysis of Environmental Justice Approaches: Procedural Environmental Justice in the EIA Process in South Africa and Zambia’, PhD Dissertation submitted to University of Manchester, 2012, 75.

³² Kuehn, ‘A Taxonomy of Environmental Justice’, 10693.

³³ *Ibid.*, 10693.

This brings me willy-nilly to the conflicted concept of social justice – conflicted because the idea has been hijacked by different ideologues to promote their own agendas. Social justice is originally a Christian vision of the way in which human relationality is to be ordered and nurtured. ‘Society ensures social justice’, to quote the *Catechism* once again, ‘when it provides the conditions that allow associations or individuals to obtain what is their due, according to their nature and vocation. Social justice is linked to the common good and the exercise of authority’.³⁴ Social justice, as these sentences make clear, is based on a certain understanding of what it means to be human and what human community should look like. Thus, the *Catechism* adds:

Social justice can be obtained only in respecting the transcendent dignity of man. The person represents the ultimate end of society, which is ordered to him: What is at stake is the dignity of the human person, whose defence and promotion have been entrusted to us by the Creator, and to whom the men and women of every moment of history are strictly and responsibly in debt.³⁵

The Christian understanding of social justice, which is premised on the inviolable dignity of every human being and the common good, puts a check on modern individualism which is fixated on the rights and interests of the autonomous and sovereign self (a manifestation, surely, of the *homo incurvatus in se*). It recognises the value of every human being and maintains that common welfare is the all-inclusive norm of all social life and societal order. Although it should inspire legislation and public policy, social justice, which puts human dignity and the common good at the centre of its concerns, goes beyond the law and the social policies of the State. It has to do with our fundamental attitude towards one another, for as Bernard Häring has perceptively pointed out, ‘society will remain disordered if social justice, as virtue, is not deeply rooted in people’s hearts’.³⁶ Social justice has to do not just with regulating the distribution of economic aid to the poor and vulnerable. It is a response to the dignity and liberty of every human being and a respect for their desire to be a valued member of society. In this way, social justice, the last of the four aspects of environmental justice in Kuehn’s taxonomy, should undergird all the others.

Rights and Responsibilities

We turn next to the question of human rights, a concept of recent pedigree but which looms large and controversial in every discussion of justice today, including environmental and economic justice. In an essay entitled ‘Christians for Human

³⁴ Catechism of the Catholic Church, https://vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p3s1c2a3.htm.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Bernard Häring, *Free and Faithful in Christ. Moral Theology for Priests and Laity. Volume 3. Light of the World, Salt of the Earth* (Middlegreen, Slough: St Paul Publications, 1981), 274.

Rights', South African theologian Derek Morphew explains why human rights should be the concern of Christians thus:

human rights have become possibly the pressing global issue of our time. This alone makes it imperative for thinking Christians to grapple with it. More profoundly, the struggle for human rights has to do with what it means to be fully human, with how and to what extent the human race can reach its potential and destiny. Any area of thought or endeavor that deals with man in his essence must be the concern of those who are committed to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, for he came to seek and save the same humanity.³⁷

Although we may certainly agree that concerns on human rights are not inimical to the Christian understanding of human relationality, we must, however, make some important qualifications. I think it is important to note that the Bible itself does not use the term 'human rights', although this concept is in some important sense not entirely alien to it. It is also important to stress that if the Bible alludes to the rights of individuals or groups at all, it is not in the sense of a legal entitlement on the basis of which an individual can bring a claim against another. Instead, in the Bible, the emphasis is on the justice that we owe to our neighbor, especially those who are pushed to the margins of society – the poor, the widows, orphans, the foreigner, etc. Thus, in Zechariah 7, we read: 'Thus says the Lord of hosts, Render true judgements, show kindness and mercy each to his brother, do not oppress the widow, the fatherless, the sojourner, or the poor; and let none of you devise evil against his brother in your heart' (7:9-10). In the Christian tradition, the concept of human rights is premised on human dignity, which, of course, is based on the biblical view that all human beings are created in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:27-28).

Once these qualifications are well understood, the Christian should have no difficulties with embracing the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights which proclaims 'the inherent dignity and ... the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family'.³⁸ In similar vein, Christians could broadly agree with the Richard Wasserstrom's characterization of human rights:

First, it must be possessed by all human beings, as well as only by human beings. Second, because it is the same right that all human beings possess, it must be possessed equally by all human beings. Third, because human rights are possessed by all human beings, we can rule out as possible candidates any of those rights which one might have in virtue of occupying any particular status or relationship, such as that of a parent, president or promisee. And fourth, if they are human rights, they

³⁷ Derek Morphew, 'Christians for Human Rights', 1991, 1.

³⁸ Preamble to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Universal Declaration), General Assembly Resolution, UN Doc A/811.

have the additional characteristic of being assertible, in a manner of speaking, ‘against the whole world’.³⁹

That said, when we take a close look at the Bible, we will discover that the language it uses is predominantly that of responsibilities, not rights. For example, in addressing unjust oppression, Isaiah did not urge its victims to claim or assert their rights. Instead, he turned to the powerful oppressors and accused them of failing in their fundamental responsibility to be just to all: ‘Woe to those who decree iniquitous decrees, and the writers who keep writing oppression, to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people their right, that widows may be their spoil, and that they may make the fatherless their prey!’ (Isaiah 10:1-2). In this passage, Isaiah places the rights of the poor alongside the responsibilities of the rich and the powerful. The New Testament broadens this further. This basic responsibility is not only that of the rich and the powerful but should be the duty of every member of the community (James 2:14-17). In the Bible, the language of rights would make little sense if it is not accompanied – indeed framed – by the concepts of responsibilities or duties. I would like to suggest that this is precisely the balance that we need to achieve when we think of justice in contemporary society, including environmental and economic justice. Too much of contemporary debates on issues of justice is dominated by loud rhetoric about the rights of individuals and groups, while issues related to responsibilities and duties are often eclipsed.

Advocates of environmental and economic justice must therefore recover what may be described as the biblical balance of seeing responsibilities as of equal importance to rights, if not more so. This is especially the case of advocates who work in the west or who are influenced by western ideas. The emphasis on responsibilities, as Oscar Arias Sanchez has pointed out, is in fact common in many societies, especially non-western ones:

[M]any societies have traditionally conceived of human relations in terms of obligations rather than rights. This is true, in general terms, for instance for much of Eastern thought. While traditionally in the West the concepts of freedom and individuality have been emphasized, in the East the notions of responsibility and community have prevailed. The fact that a Universal Declaration of Human Rights was drafted instead of a Universal Declaration of Human Duties undoubtedly reflects the philosophical and cultural background of the document’s drafters who, as is known, represented the Western powers who emerged victorious from the Second World War.⁴⁰

³⁹ Richard Wasserstrom, ‘Rights, Human Rights and Racial Discrimination’ in James Rachels (ed), *Moral Problems: A Collection of Philosophical Essays* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), 12.

⁴⁰ Oscar Arias Sanchez, ‘Some Contributions to a Universal Declaration of Human Obligations’, see <https://www.interactioncouncil.org>.

The rights and freedoms of an individual and a group are never absolute. They must be placed in creative tension with the rights and freedoms of other individuals and groups, and the interest of the general public or the common good. This means that in asserting our rights, we must at the same time be cognizant of our obligations towards others who also have rights. This is clearly stated in Article 29 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights:

In the exercise of his rights and freedoms, everyone shall be subjected only to such limitations as are determined by law solely for the purpose of securing due recognition and respect for the rights and freedoms of others and of meeting the just requirements of morality, public order and the general welfare in a democratic society.

The assertion of rights devoid of any consideration of corresponding obligations or responsibilities is politically dangerous and socially harmful. As Richard Falk explains:

Responsibilities must be conceived as correlative to rights. Such a premise would be well served by the drafting of a Universal Declaration of Human Responsibilities as an indispensable companion to the Universal Declaration of Human rights. The Western discourse on human rights works within the invisible boundaries of self-expression and resistance to authority (the individualist ethos that gives rise to consumer absolutism and all forms of permissiveness), and without sense of responsibility to the well-being and needs of the community. The notion of protecting the individual is a great advance over its absolutist antecedents, but it needs to be balanced by the acknowledgement that the individual is embedded within a community. The importance of placing limits upon the human assertiveness at all levels of the social organization is overlooked if the stress is placed only on the protection of individuals.⁴¹

Uncommon Love and the Common Good

We turn to the third broad theme in the Christian social vision as we reflect on environmental and economic justice, namely, the concept of the common good. Every society is essentially a cooperative enterprise which consists of dynamic and often complex forms of purposeful collaboration and interaction. Although much of these interactions are the result of deliberate choices or some form of social contract, their presence in different societies throughout human history points to something more basic and profound. They point to the fact that such intercourse is an ontological feature of human sociality, the essence of human community. The

⁴¹ Richard Falk, *Human Rights Horizons: The Pursuit of Justice in a Globalising World* (London: Routledge 2000), 88.

relationships that obtain in human society and the processes and structures that support them suggest what may be described as the basic commonness that all its members share, and reveal the kind of life and goods that each of us cherish and enjoy. Philosophers have been calling this the good life. However, because the lives of individuals are interdependently intertwined with one another, the good life is only possible when our relationships and interdependencies are ordered in a certain way. This means that the quest for the good life cannot be divorced from the question of social justice in the way that we have described it. In his great work, *Republic*, Plato rightly saw that the essence of justice has to do with the ordering and conduct of social relations. Thus, for the Greek philosopher, justice and the common good are synonymous. A *good* society, where the lives of its members can truly flourish, is a *just* society. And a just society is one in which its institutions and economic life are ordered in such a way that the goods that are most beneficial to society as a whole are maximized for each of its members.

What do we mean by the common good? Here the social teachings of the Catholic Church have proven to be extremely instructive and enlightening. *Gaudium et spes*, promulgated by Pope Paul VI in 1965, helpfully describes the common good 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’.⁴² It adds that the ‘common good embraces the sum of those conditions of the social life whereby men, families and associations more adequately and readily may attain their own perfection’.⁴³ As this description makes clear, the common good has to do not just with the physical, material or social wellbeing of individuals in society, but their moral and spiritual development and ‘fulfilment’ or ‘perfection’ as well. The Christian conception of the common good places a high premium in the recognition of the intrinsic value of each individual regardless of race or social status, that is, that all human beings are equal. Indeed, this must be the fundamental basis for all common good discourse – religious and secular – for without this basic conviction all talk of the common good are simply disingenuous and humbug. From the Christian standpoint, to speak seriously about the common good is to be convinced that ‘every type of discrimination, whether social or cultural, whether based on sex, race, colour, social condition, language or religion, is to be overcome and eradicated as contrary to God’s intent’.⁴⁴ Because of its inextricable relation to the equality of every human being, to speak of the common good is to take seriously the rights and duties of every individual. In his great encyclical *Pacem in terris* (1963), Pope John XXIII makes this connect and emphasises the role of civil authorities in ensuring the rights and duties of each individual are recognised and respected:

⁴² *Gaudium et spes*, par. 26.

http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat_ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html (accessed 21 December 2019).

⁴³ *Ibid.*, par.74.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, par.29.

It is generally accepted today that the common good is best safeguarded when personal rights and duties are guaranteed. The chief concern of civil authorities must therefore be to ensure that these rights are recognised, respected, co-ordinated, defended and promoted, and that each individual is enabled to perform his duties more easily'.⁴⁵

The common good is closely connected to the way in which the natural and social environment is developed, sustained and enhanced for the wellbeing and flourishing of every member of society. In *Centesimus annus*, Pope John Paul II stressed that 'it is the task of the State to provide for the defence and preservation of common goods such as the natural and human environments, which cannot be safeguarded by market forces.' But this is the responsibility of every member of society as well, not just that of the State. Thus, the pontiff adds that 'the State and all of society have the duty of defending those collective goods which, among others, constitute the essential framework for the legitimate pursuit of personal goals on the part of each individual'.⁴⁶

It is extremely important that we locate our reflections on the common good within a theological horizon so as to avoid a reductionist account. The reason why the common good needs to be addressed at all is because of the trenchant injustices and inequalities that prevail in modern human societies, which are the manifestation of human sinfulness. Pope John Paul II points this out clearly in his 1987 encyclical *Sollicitudo rei socialis* where he writes, "'Sin" and "structures of sin" are categories which are seldom applied to the situation of the contemporary world'. 'However', he adds, 'one cannot easily gain a profound understanding of the reality that confronts us unless we give a name to the root of the evils which afflict us'.⁴⁷ Sin results in distortions of human relationships which can take many different forms. One example is the temptation to discard the notion of the common good altogether in favour of a pluralist conception of 'privatist' ideas of the good. This approach is inspired by the idea that rights must be privileged over goods prevalent in certain liberal accounts of society that are inspired by the individualist ideal. This has led to what some writers have called pleonexic goods. Simply put, a pleonexic good works on the zero-sum game principle where the benefit of A is obtained by detracting benefit from some other agent or group, B. Any development in society that is based on this attitude and approach would violate the common good.

⁴⁵ *Pacem in terris* (On Establishing Universal Peace in Truth, Justice, Charity, and Liberty), 1963. http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_xxiii/encyclicals/documents/hf_j-xxiii_enc_110411963_pacem_en.html.

⁴⁶ *Centesimus Annus* (On the Hundredth Anniversary of "Rerum Novarum"), 1991, par. 40. http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_01051991_centesimus-annus.html.

⁴⁷ *Sollicitudo rei socialis* (On the Twentieth Anniversary of 'Populorum progressio'), 1987, par. 36. http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30121987_sollicitudo-rei-socialis.html.

Although the role of the State is important in upholding the common good, the latter cannot be nurtured only or even fundamentally through legislations. For the Christian, the common good is served only when members of the community treat each other as their neighbour and relate to one another with that respectful and responsible action which the Bible calls *agape*. As Augustine clearly saw and articulated in his celebrated *The City of God*, the true commonweal is an assembly of people in which each citizen loves his neighbour as he loves himself. Christ's commandment to love one another, to be sure, was directed at his disciples. But this commandment is not limited to Christians only. Insofar as all human beings are created in God's image, we are all neighbours to each other and therefore must give to one another their due, namely, justice and respect. As Nicholas Wolterstorff explains:

The commandment to love another is grounded on this common sharing in the image of God – on the fact that my fellow human being is, in Isaiah's words, of my "own flesh and blood" ... Every human being is, in this deep sense, my neighbour. Indeed, says Calvin, Jesus' purpose of the parable of the Good Samaritan was to teach 'that the word *neighbour* extends indiscriminately to every man, because the whole human race is united by a sacred bond of fellowship'.⁴⁸

CONCLUSION

Let me conclude.

In addressing issues of environmental and economic justice, the Church must realise that it speaks in a context that is philosophically and ideological plural, and that it does not have the monopoly on moral discourse. In our postmodern world, where different truth-claims and moralities jostle with one another, there is no *philosophia perennis* that could provide the shared framework for ethical, social and moral discourse. But this does not mean that the Church surrender to the bleak notion of total incommensurability that some postmodern thinkers are suggesting and conclude that there can be no common grounds, no shared concerns, no broad vision to support meaningful and constructive dialogue and collaboration.

This is blatantly false. The Church must therefore take every opportunity to be involved in those conversations that would result in meaningful and constructive collaborative projects for the common good of society. In addition, as I have already pointed out, the Church believes that it can bring to the table important insights and perspectives that others who do not share her theological commitments or spiritual heritage may have missed or are not cognisant of. As I have tried to show, the Church can contribute in meaningful ways to the modern

⁴⁸ Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Until Justice Embrace Peace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 78.

discourse on justice, on rights and the common good that would shed more light to the issue of environmental and economic justice.

But the Church can do more than just being an active participant of public discussion on justice issues, important though this is. She should try as far as possible to work together with the State and also with other faith communities to address issues of injustice. Here the concept of the ‘dialogue of action’, which features quite prominently in literature on interfaith relations can be of help. The ‘dialogue of action’ is where ‘Christians and others collaborate for the integral development and liberation of people.’⁴⁹ While this concept is employed on interfaith dialogue, I am here proposing its relevance in the concrete collaboration between all parties of goodwill and with shared concerns for the common good, including the government or the State. I believe that such the Church’s participation in such collaborative efforts are part and parcel of her prophetic witness and action in the world. They can go some way of realising the vision that the prophet Micah sketches in answer to his own question.

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⁴⁹ *Dialogue and Proclamation*, 42.

http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/documents/rc_pc_interelg_doc_1905_1991_dialogue-and-proclamatio_en.html.