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Sustainability and Climate in Religion: A case of study of the Green Churches Network in Africa (toile des Églises vertes en Afrique) TEVA

Marcel Ngirinshuti¹

Since the Stockholm earth summit in 1972, Ecological issues have increasingly emerged as fundamental concerns and data to be considered in the lives of individuals and institutions. Religions do not remain on the sidelines of this issue. In fact, Pope Paul VI's letter to the Food and agriculture organization of the United Nations in 1966 highlights the link between food crises, models of economic development and the necessary respect for the earth.² It should be noted that since that letter, through interfaith and interreligious declarations, religions have continued to demonstrate their willingness to contribute to the reduction of the ecological crisis that threatens the entire world. Pope Francois' *Laudato Si encyclical On Care for our Common home*, which applies beyond Catholicism, marks a decisive turning point for a commitment of religions to the promotion of integral ecology. In his sixth chapter dedicated to education, the Pope expresses his hope in these words: "I also hope that in our seminaries and religious houses of formation we educate for responsible austerity, for the grateful contemplation of the world, for the protection of the fragility of the poor and of the environment."³

From this statement, churches are invited to become aware of their ecological responsibility in order to "mold" communities to engage in the search for solutions to today's ecological problems. What about the churches in Africa? What place do these churches give to integral ecology in the education of the faithful? These are questions to which we seek answers in this paper by highlighting the place of ecological issues in the consciousness of the churches (I) and a brief presentation of the Network of Green Churches in Africa (TEVA) as a case study (II).

Ecological issues in the consciousness of the churches

Although environmental issues have been on the agenda of Governments since the 1972 Stockholm Earth Summit, we would like to highlight some evidence of the Church's involvement in these same issues. Far from pretending to address all the related issues, special emphasis will be placed firstly on the consciousness of the World Council of Churches (WCC) and secondly on the engagement of the churches in Africa.

The ecological consciousness of the World Council of Churches (WCC)

At the global level, ecological commitment was marked at the Sixth Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in Vancouver in 1983. Under the theme: "Jesus Christ, Life of the World", the Assembly addressed many sub-themes, including the nuclear threat and neo-

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² Paul VI, « La faim dans le monde », in DC, n1472, col. 974-975, 1966.

³ Chapitre 6,214

colonialism as challenges to peace and survival. The WCC therefore resolved to enter "into a process of commitment to justice, peace and the integrity of creation."⁴

Since the sixth assembly of the WCC the churches' commitment to the protection of nature has grown considerably, hosting regional gatherings and movements of the faithful against threats to harmony in creation. The seventh assembly which took place in Canberra, Australia (1991) under the theme: "Come, Holy Spirit, renew the whole creation," and the ninth in particular which took place in Porto Alegre in 2006, under the theme: "God, in your grace, transform the world" exemplifies this commitment. The tenth assembly in Busan in 2013 had a social orientation with the theme "Justice and Peace." In its assemblies, at all times, the WCC has invited its member churches to engage publicly and act together to address the challenges of justice, peace and the integrity of creation. The focus has always been on the development and practice of a "theology of life", the implications of which the churches must seek to realize in their own contexts, and how local insights fit into a global analysis. This is the rationale for the various assemblies that have taken place on the African continent. Following the Vancouver Assembly, the churches committed themselves to the protection of the environment through the creation of structures called "justice and peace" within them⁵. It was in this context that the European Ecumenical Assembly took place in Basel in 1989. The theme of this meeting was "Peace and Justice for all Creation". From this meeting came out a publication that became a resource for parishes. The publication offers prayers of confession of sins, proclamation of forgiveness and commitment to conversion on twelve themes such as lifestyle, the division of churches, torture, energy saving, reducing daily violence and peace education.

At this assembly, as René Coste pointed out, the conferences challenged the concept of "constant economic growth"⁶. Thus, the speakers were particularly interested, firstly, in the use of natural resources and energy policies; secondly, in the elimination of waste, emphasizing the international dimension. Finally, emphasis was placed on issues relating to genetics.

After theological reflections on the "God of creation", the Basel gathering devoted part of its final declaration to the management of creation, in which delegates declared their awareness of the need to establish a new relationship of partnership between human beings and nature. They called it "vital and urgent" to understand that the earth's resources must be shared with future generations. Consequently, they committed themselves to a new way of life in their churches, societies, communities and families.

Following the gathering in Basel, the gathering in Graz (1997) focused on "Reconciliation, God's gift and source of new life." From this meeting, recommendations were issued which integrated the fruit of the work and the proposals which had emerged since Basel, and proposals that concern both lay people and clergy. Thus, for example, it was recommended that the Churches consider and promote the safeguarding of creation as an integral part of church life, to promote a lifestyle in line with the criteria of sustainability and social justice. It was suggested that, as established by the Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarchate, the churches organize a common feast of creation and establish a network of environmental

⁴ COE, l'Assemblée de Bâle, Paris, Bayard, 2002, p. 16.

⁵ Cf. F. TINLAND, (1977), *la différence anthropologique. Essais sur les rapports de la nature et de l'artifice*, Paris, Abier-Montaigne, 1977.

⁶ Cf. R. COSTE, (1989), *paix, justice, gérance de la création*, Paris, Nouvelle cité, 1989.

leaders. The recommendations also spoke of a day of prayer for the care of creation in the European churches. Finally, the participants formulated commitments to promote the development of a lifestyle against economic pressures for a responsible and sustainable quality of life. It also urged to support church environmental organizations and ecumenical networks in their responsibility for the care of creation. The gathering also decided to create a European Ecumenical Charter. Rather than presenting all the details of this gathering, it is safe to say that some of its recommendations were soon implemented. The European Christian Environmental Network (ECEN) was formed in 1998. The ECEN works and produces extensive documentation on environmental issues from an ecclesial perspective. The European Ecumenical Charter was officially adopted at a third ecumenical gathering in Strasbourg on April 19-22, 2001.⁷

In the light of the results of the Graz Assembly in 2007, the churches of Europe met in Sibiu with the theme "The Light of Christ illuminates all people". The message that emerged from this assembly shows that the Charter and ecological concerns were still very much present. Once again, the recommendations took into account the issues that have become central since the previous assemblies. The "radical globalization of the market" was also underlined. The globalization of the market has catastrophic ecological effects and, seen from the perspective of climate change, was incompatible with safeguarding the future of our planet.

At this assembly, prayers were offered for greater sensitivity and respect for the wonderful diversity of God's creation. It was recommended that the period from September 1 to October 4 be set aside for prayer for the protection of creation and the promotion of sustainable lifestyles.

Churches in Africa facing ecological issues

In the African context, responding to the vision of the WCC, the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC), through its assemblies, has approached the themes related to some of the challenges facing the continent in the following ways:

- Lomé, Togo 1987: You shall be my witnesses;
- Harare (Zimbabwe) 1992: Abundant Life in Jesus Christ;
- Addis Ababa (Ethiopia) 1997: Slaughtered but not destroyed;
- Yaoundé (Cameroon) 2003: Come, let us rebuild.

All these themes reflect the real prophetic witness of the Church in Africa as the peoples of that continent struggle with the problems they face in their daily lives. For example, the theme of the eighth assembly, "Come, let us rebuild", was based on the fact that the continent was experiencing conflict and war due to the unfortunate problems of bad governance, corruption and economic injustice. The assembly was thus a call to the Churches to participate ardently in the reconstruction of Africa. At this assembly, the AACC declared itself available to support churches in addressing the challenges facing the continent and to serve as a platform for collective voice and action. Therefore, the issues it focused on were social and economic justice (overcoming poverty), health and well-being (HIV/AIDS) and

⁷ M.HOEGER,(2011)*les dix ans de la charte Oecumenique européenne* ,www.dialogueoecumenique.eerv.ch,consulté le 10/04/2018

international relations (governance, ethics and morality). This commitment is intimately linked to its global vision: "Churches in Africa together for life, truth, justice and peace".

Finally, from the ecumenical gatherings and their decisions on peace, justice and the integrity of creation, the churches have been attentive to the changing environmental challenges at the global, continental and national levels. In some contexts, efforts have been made to seek appropriate solutions to specific problems. Some churches have a good understanding of the issue and, in addition to some practices, the media have been prominent in communicating their ecological commitment. Along with environmental challenges, we see the emergence, on the ground, of Christian associations that are making efforts to contribute to ecological harmony.

Confronted with this situation, the churches, in spite of being signatories to ecumenical declarations, acted as if they had no role to play in changing the situation. According to the various declarations mentioned above, the churches should integrate environmental issues into their pastoral care, join religious ecological networks, question the political authorities on the good governance of public goods, and create places that promote peace, justice and the integrity of creation. It is here that we see the *raison d'être* of the Web of Green Churches in Africa (TEVA). These churches are among those who have signed the ecumenical declarations on the safeguarding of creation.

The Green Church Network in Africa as a case study

Despite the interest by the Ecumenical Council of Churches and the All Africa Council of Churches in ecological issues, we still have ways to go as a continent. However, the Green Church Network in Africa has made significant strides in creating awareness. I present the Green Church web in Africa as a case study that marks ecological awareness on this continent.

Brief presentation of the Green Church Network in Africa

The Green Churches Network in Africa (TEVA) is a network of churches, denominational structures and associations, which are committed to care for the "common home" (planet-Earth) in Africa. It has biblical, anthropological (African culture), historical foundations, and some texts of the WCC serve as springboards. Begun in 2016, TEVA currently has (at the end of 2019) 1,808 parishes grouped into 19 churches in 12 African countries namely, Congo (DRC), Cameroon, Gabon, Congo Brazzaville, Togo, Rwanda, Burundi, Ivory Coast, Benin, Senegal, Madagascar. The vision is to reach 2020 green parishes by the end of 2020. As its mission, starting from the fact that ecological questions are often perceived as utopian and very complex, TEVA aims to promote knowledge of African ecological issues and to bring integral ecology to both researchers and the general public. TEVA's objectives include:

- Help churches, denominational structures and associations to design, manage and evaluate projects related to integral ecology
- Help pastoral training centers to incorporate sustainable development issues in to the official education program
- Provide in-depth education on ecological issues to pastors and pastoral care workers
- Help pastoral training centers to develop research and pedagogy in integral ecology
- Organize events dedicated to integral ecology (seminars, symposia, study days, etc.)

Activities, challenges and future possibilities

Communities undertake actions at the parish level, at the family or individual level aimed at *Building Awareness*: It is about explaining environmental issues such as climate change and the biodiversity crisis to help people understand what is happening in the common house; and *Nurturing Spirituality*: This mainly concerns the liturgy and catechesis, the teachings of which are adapted to the recipients according to their ages and their concerns. (Children, young people, elderly, disabled etc.). Activities are carried out at denominational schools and include:

- Giving lectures to students of theological training centers to better prepare them for their future professional life in the face of ecological questions
- Encourage, advice and supervise the parishes on ecological subjects
- broadcast conferences well suited to all parish groups
- put parishioners in action when faced with various environmental challenges, both at home, in the parish and in their various workplaces
- encourage seminaries, biblical schools and Faculties of theology to educate in responsible austerity, in grateful contemplation of the world, in protecting the fragility of the poor and the environment in their official programs
- disseminate knowledge and skills beyond the member churches

In its activities, the Green Churches Network in Africa encounters socio-economic, political and pastoral difficulties as well.

- Socio-economic difficulties: poverty of families' scientific difficulties (lack of documentation and resource persons)
- Political difficulties: contracts signed between governments and multinationals in the exploitation of natural resources do not always respect human dignity
- Pastoral difficulties: few pastors are interested in environmental issues Lack of material and financial means (movement of volunteers)

For a better future, the Green Church network in Africa is committed to:

- Put together a web newsletter
- Create ecological fields of application in pastoral and theological training centers
- Organize events (conferences, seminars, workshops, etc.) with political decision-makers and religious leaders at local (e.g. mayors and councilors), regional and national levels, as well as with organized civil society and schools
- Create networks with other organizations and institutions whose activities are part of the promotion of integral ecology

Conclusion

There are many speeches that revolve around ecological questions of sustainable development. The Green Churches in Africa Network believes that it is time to move from speeches to action. Thus, three principles serve as the foundation for its action on the ground:

1. The complexity of the African situation is an opportunity for the churches to demonstrate the awareness of their Mission and their presence on this country
2. Any Christian education which does not allow the educated to integrate ecological questions in the course of his period of life on this earth is not evangelical.
3. It is not because things are hard that one should not commit, it is because one does not commit that things get harder. Just start with small individual and community gestures and off you go!