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The interconnectedness of life, climate change and pandemics

In 2015, Pope Francis, in *Laudato si'*, underlined the fundamental connection between the environmental crisis and the current social crisis. To remind us that 'everything is interconnected, he called for a personal and community ecological conversion.'

In October 2019, Pope Francis issued another document *Querida Amazonia (Beloved Amazon)* to reflect on cultural, ecological and religious issues facing the Amazon - a distinct ecological territory with population of 34 million including 3 million indigenous people from some 400 ethnic groups. His hope is for a region that fights for the 'rights of the poor,' especially the 'original peoples' whose rights have been ignored and threatened by national and international businesses and which he labelled as 'injustice and crime.' The distinctive cultural, social and human riches of the Amazon need to be recognised.

Querida Amazonia reiterates Pope Francis' the most important themes from *Laudato Si'*: that everything is connected: *'The care of people and the care of ecosystems are inseparable.'* Focusing on the Amazon in particular, and other regions, he points to economic interests that extract resources and threaten the equilibrium of the planet which 'depends on the health of the Amazon region.'¹

As our planet now is living with yet another pandemic, it is time to realise that we are in a new geological epoch (Anthropocene) where *'humanity's influence is causing global climate change, the loss of wild spaces, and a drastic decline in the richness of life. Microbes are not exempt. Whether on coral reefs or in the human gut, we are disrupting the relationships between microbes and their hosts, often pulling apart species that have been together for millions of years.'*² Covid-19's history is not yet fully known, but the links between animal and human health could not be clearer.³

In 2019, human-induced climate change was blamed for hot Australian summers and the deadly bush fires over 20% of the country. Distressingly, entire habitats of several animal species were lost as were the lives of an estimated 4 billion animals.⁴

As people ask when this pandemic will end, we need to ask how it came about. It is not enough to find a scapegoat such as China or blame those living in bad social circumstances when they are disproportionately impacted. The experience of this pandemic must wake us



to humanity's capacity to demand changes of ourselves, our communities and all levels of government.⁵

Destruction of forests by multicultural corporations and their replacement with soy, palm and cattle, have accelerated climate change. According to indigenous leaders, this encourages the emergence of serious disease. The loss of habitat has brought wild animals into closer contact with humans and domesticated animals⁶ enabling diseases, such as the coronavirus to jump the animal-human barrier and spread through human-to-human contact.

The coronavirus is now telling the world what we have been saying for thousands of years — that if we do not help protect biodiversity and nature, then we will face this and worse future threats.⁷

This pandemic like climate change does not care about race, culture, or gender identity. Several oil companies have conducted misinformation campaigns about the known effects of fossil fuel on climate in the 1950s through 1999. Millions were misled into thinking that fossil fuels were less harmful than they were. Attempts are increasing to hold entities responsible for climate-related impacts such as floods, hurricanes, wildfires and drought. This accountability would galvanise action to drastically reduce greenhouse gas emissions.⁸

To simply look for those responsible for the current pandemic, such as wet markets, we can get side-tracked into ignoring 'money-driven human exploitation' and the

disruption of ecological equilibrium upon which all life flourishes. We must protect all forms of life within their unique ecological niches and the well-being of the planet itself.⁹

Querida Amazonia also highlights the negative impact on climate, indigenous plants and trees and the extensive negative transformation of forests into agricultural land in the Amazon region. It also points to mountains stripped bare for mineral resources in the Philippines and African countries. People are exposed not only to environmental disasters like mud-slides, destruction of homes, and all kinds of dispossession but also to the severe ecological imbalances that threaten wholesome living, for human, animal, and plant alike.¹⁰

'Already, the effects to the natural world are massive and deadly, including infectious disease transmission patterns.' Where scientists and popular movements could not convince the world to act, Mother Earth is bringing about a reorientation through this pandemic!¹¹ One might be forgiven for wondering if it is not Mother Earth's response to destructive human activity.

'If only the world [had] worked to strengthen the rights of indigenous peoples — who have learned to live in nature with biodiversity and protect animal and plant species — we would see fewer epidemics such as the one that we are currently facing.'¹²

Recent peer-reviews have concluded that protecting the land and human rights¹³ of indigenous peoples who occupy much of the Earth's forested areas is the best way to keep forests standing. This in turn reduces global warming and biodiversity loss. They play a vital role in successful conservation and restoration but are often excluded from decision-making about forest policy.

'For us, climate change is not abstract .Just in my small community... we are [now] struggling to produce certain foods because of the changing climate. All of the Caribbean coast of Central America is confronting rising sea levels, and that is having an impact on the economy.' *Sucre Romero*¹⁴

Globally, indigenous territories are increasingly under threat. Weakening of environmental protections, indigenous land rights, and the rule of law pose an existential threat to indigenous peoples and local communities and their territories. Reversing this trend is critical for the future of the climate-buffering Amazon forests. Indigenous leaders say protecting indigenous rights and forests can assist in

finding medicines to counter serious diseases and future pandemics. However, global companies too often enter indigenous lands and take their products and traditional knowledge without compensation.¹⁵

The slow dying of the planet has meant the suffering and death of many people around the world. As this has happened, too many the governments of the world, like latter-day Pontius Pilates, have set aside their responsibilities and blamed the people. Decades of international negotiations and the commitments to agreements like the Paris Accords, personal, institutional, and systemic behaviour has not changed enough to stop the dying of this planet we are called to love. We have not been willing to stop and pay attention. Our political leaders have not been brave enough to pass and enforce legislation to hold the fossil fuel industry accountable for their responsibility in making us dependent upon their products.¹⁶

Humanity is faced with a series of self-made, interrelated crises, from the environmental catastrophe to poverty, inequality, the absence of peace and an unprecedented level of displaced persons, among other pressing issues. All have been brought about by the negative behaviour of mankind, by the pervasive modes of living, the corrosive values and ideologies that dominate contemporary life.¹⁷

Socio-economic and political systems are unjust when they favour the few at the expense of the many, or when they are driven by divisive materialistic values. Self-centred human activity has disrupted ecosystems and weather patterns altered by the contamination of the atmosphere which has led to destructive climate change. Many people recognise the need for a new way of living, but resistance has been fierce among governments and corporate power.¹⁸

We have a unique opportunity to rethink how we inhabit our 'Common Home'. We need to question capitalism's unlimited accumulation, competition, individualism, indifference towards the misery of millions of people, the downsizing of the State and the exaltation the 'greed is good' motto that many financial institution hold to. The current pandemic and threats to the planet highlight what Pope Francis calls an 'anti-life system' because it has violated 'the most universal law of the cosmos, of nature and of the human being: the interdependence of everyone with everyone; that there is no being, much less us humans, that is an island disconnected from everything else.'

We are called to different relationships with nature and the Earth. We have to overcome indifference and feel the pain of others in our hearts. In the pandemic, no one is immune. We have to be in solidarity with one another, to care for each other and all living things and take collective responsibility beyond our fences or the nearest hill.¹⁹



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