

November 2012

"Earth-People"

-excerpts from a declaration by Conference of Religious India (CRI)*

Preamble: A representative group of 50 Major Superiors and specialists from the 12 Regions of India met for a three days National Consultation on "Earth-People" in Tarumitra, an ecological center in Patna. Fr. Robert S.J., the visionary Director, led us into a serious reflection on the wonder of earth, wealth of diversity, web of relationship and welfare of humankind nurtured by the sacred earth. Proper integration to earth and environment is foundational to holistic spirituality of persons, sustainable life of all living forms and salvific destiny of humankind. But the concerns of environmental changes, ecological degradation and exploitation of earth are matters of grave consequences for our future generations and us. Seeing from the eyes of the Creator and hearing the voice of His messengers, the Religious of India and all men and women of good will are called to wake up to act on behalf of earth and all that is sustained by this nurturing mother. Our commitment to gender justice, social equity and balanced relationship impels us further to this larger reality of a birthing, caring, nurturing, and fulfilling earth.

1. The Critical Time.

1.1 Humankind is at a critical point in history. The global warming and the consequent ecological crisis are threatening the very existence of the earth. We live in a web of life where the entire globe is inter-dependent and inter-related. We live together or we perish together. The earth cries out, and the earth counts on us.

1.2. The decreasing and polluted supply of water has reached a crisis point today, as one third of world's population suffers from water shortage; it will reach the even more distressing rate of two thirds by 2025. Four fifth of the earth's forests have already been cleared away. While on an average a country needs 33% of its land under forest cover, India has only about 11% of forest cover. The contamination of the soil through non-degradable plastic and pesticides is spreading on at an alarming rate. The global temperature has risen due to the emission of green house gases causing drastic climatic changes like frequent floods in one part of the globe and droughts in another, and even graver calamities for the future. Air pollution is causing serious health hazards to millions of people in the metropolises, especially of the developing countries. Consequent to deforestation several species of flora and fauna are threatened while many have become extinct. (Ref. "Down to Earth" (Ed) Agarwal; Cf. Centre for Science and Environment, Delhi)

1.3. The poor, especially the women and the children, are the first and worst victims of environmental degradation. When the environment is degraded, the access of the poor to the natural resources is limited or denied. Their dependence on the environment also makes the poor very vulnerable to degradation, disasters and natural calamities. This is so very real and true in our neighborhoods and in our country as a whole. The poor are 'the most threatened species' on earth. The cry of the earth is also the cry of the poor.

1.4. Scientists across the world agree that an anthropocentric development and consumerist life-style, based on human greed, are at the root of this crisis. We need a paradigm shift in our relationship with the earth and environment. We seem to be like the cold blooded frog adjusting to the heating water being unaware of the impending disaster at a higher temperature. The humans who have contributed to the situation can remedy the same. They need political will, spiritual outlook and global commitment to act.

1.5. The impact of environmental degradation is universal and all pervading. We may arrive at a point of no more clean water to drink; no more land to cultivate; no more forests to preserve the bio-diversity and no more clean air to breathe. All of us, rich and the poor, socially and culturally diverse, share the same predicament. It is time to act and act together. "Man did not weave the web of life. He is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does it to himself". (Chief Seattle 1854). We discover a new identity as members of the earth community, as earth citizens. We are in a new world asking for a new kind of relationship other than 'consuming'. It is time to learn to walk humbly and joyfully on this earth, with respect due to a mother.

2. The Earth-Attitudes. (The E-Attitudes)

The present crisis calls for a shift in our mental categories and a change in our way of relating to one another, nature and the Lord of creation. We enlist the following points for a new way.

2.1. As Indians, we are steeped in a sense of the sacred, a sense of wonder and awe, openness and surrender before the mystery of creation. The reverence for nature and the interdependence of the secular and the sacred are familiar to us. We invite all to make enough time for silence and wonder towards the mystery of the Earth.

2.2. We sense a cosmic world view in the holistic approach to life of our people, in their relatedness to the earth and the world of spirits. We invite you to nurture and savour the sensory and the contemplative approach to Mother Earth- the womb of life. *"The earth is at the same time mother; she is the mother of all that is natural, mother of all that is human; she is the mother of all; for contained in her are the seeds of all"*(Hildegard of Bingen).

2.3. God has covenanted the earth to him/herself. The earth and every part of this earth are sacred and connected. We invite all to appreciate the web of life and learn to dwell on this earth.

2.4. We resonate with our people in celebrating life at significant moments in the seasonal cycles. We invite everyone to develop a taste for the bio-diversity of this beautiful earth and to pray with the changing moods of the birds, the trees, the mountains and the rivers.

2.5. As consecrated people, we appreciate the beautiful narratives of creation in our own scriptures and in that of our peoples and traditions and resolve to take our place in the cosmic web of life, one that mother earth can count on.

2.6."The Lord dwells in the heart of everything that is. Let us, therefore enjoy everything with detachment. Do not covet the wealth of anyone". (Isa Upanishad.1.). We strive to develop a spirituality of 'enjoyment with detachment'.

2.7. With the Church Fathers and Mothers (Ireneus, Hildegard of Bingen) we believe that the creation is the outpouring of God's goodness and beauty and that it is God's body. As a sacrament of God, we learn to accept and revere the creation.

2.8. This beautiful sacrament of God is entrusted to us humans, to tend and to take care of it (Gen 2:15) because earth belongs to the Lord (Lev.25:23). It is fragile and vulnerable in our hands. Hence let us learn to receive this gift, befriend it and sustain its beauty and vulnerability in bio-diversity.

2.9. Each one of us is part of a long journey of life and we carry within us a history of 13.7 billion years. More than ever, today we need to be awakened to the interrelatedness of life. We are cousins to one another genetically and spiritually; we are part of a cosmic act of growing into a culture of inter-relatedness. We are part of an ever-evolving history enlivened and guided by the Spirit of God who renews the face of the Earth every moment.

2.10. We live our religious vows with an ecological understanding, loving actively many rather than one, relishing diverse things rather than stimulating greed, and being faithful to 'creation' rather than to our egos.

2.11. As Religious in India, we want to be rooted in the indigenous systems of our people, creatively and courageously pursuing alternate models of sustainable living and relevant interventions that respect the earth.

2.12 We resolve to labour with God to save our beleaguered planet, our beautiful, vulnerable Mother Earth. Together with the divine Spirit, let us replenish and renew the face of the earth in striving to realize a new heaven and new earth.

2.13. We pray with Teilhard de Chardin: *"Blessed be you, universal matter, immeasurable time, boundless ether, triple abyss of stars, atoms and generations; you who by overflowing and dissolving our narrow standards of measurement reveal to us the dimensions of God."* (Hymn to Matter)

2.14. With Francis of Assisi, we sing the hymn of the nature and live a joyous life in love with brother sun and sister moon.

Conclusion

Let the Religious of India, be ever engaged in a search which is a stance for life against death and destruction, for conservation against consumerism, for need against greed, for enabling power against dominating and exploiting power, for enough against craving for more and more, for the spirit of 'leavers' against 'takers', for integrity of creation against exploiting nature. We need to reinvent new space and structures, adopt new life styles to nurture such values that will preserve integrity of humanity and creation. Let our eco-consciousness and eco-sensitivity lead to a firm and sincere eco-commitment an integrated spirituality of love and compassion that embrace all God's creation.

**There are 822 Major Superiors registered with Conference of Religious India (CRI). They belong to 334 Congregations representing 1,15,587 professed members. The national secretariat is in New Delhi. The above declaration was made in October 2008.*