



Message for Lent 2019

An ecological conversion

Dear faithful:

Lent is the preparation for Easter, the celebration of the victory over death and the powers of death. Every year we are offered the opportunity to reflect on the question: do I choose for life and how? To answer this question, it is helpful to always recall the most urgent problems that face us and reflect on them. The Synod of the Amazon occupies our minds and the three Guyana's have already completed a first evaluation. For Suriname, the most pertinent problems are the land rights of the Indigenous and the Maroons, the threat to bio-diversity, poverty, corruption, pollution, youth and education. Each time these and many other issues surfaced, so did the urgent need for a conversion in the hearts of men and women, in "our thoughts and in our words, in what we have done, and in what we have failed to do," as we confess so faithfully in every Eucharist. A conversion in all aspects of our human life. As a response to the present day challenges for humanity and the earth, the Pope asks for an ecological conversion. In this Lenten message I would like us to reflect on that.

During these forty days of Lent we reflect on our lives, both as individuals and as community. A good reflection requires an acknowledgement of our weaknesses and how they have led us to sin. We understand 'sin' here as a rupture in our relationship with God, with each other and with the rest of creation. In his encyclical *Laudato si'*, Pope Francis says: "[H]uman life is grounded in three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: with God, with our neighbour and with the earth itself. According to the Bible, these three vital relationships have been broken, both outwardly and within us. This rupture is sin. The harmony between the Creator, humanity and creation as a whole was disrupted by our presuming to take the place of God and refusing to acknowledge our creaturely limitations. This in turn distorted our mandate to "have dominion" over the earth (cf. Gen 1:28), to "till it and keep it" (Gen 2:15)" (LS 66). To restore this harmony we therefore need a conversion on all three levels: an ecological conversion.

A conversion in our relationship with the earth

This demands a conversion in our thinking about nature in order to arrive at the profound awareness that the breakdown of creation is caused by human activity. Through sin came a rupture in the relationship between human beings and nature. In our time, no one is unaware of the fact that gradually creation is being destroyed, and in no small way through the grave pollution we create. Here we can say that the greatest polluters are the industrialized countries. Unfortunately, they do not bear their responsibility for it sufficiently and as a result poor countries and nature pay the price. Both individually and as community we are responsible for the damage to creation, because each one of us takes part in it. This realization compels us to reduce our share in this pollution, or even eliminate it completely. As individuals and as community there

are simple things we can do to restore the environment we have damaged, for example by making sure that products, which are harmful to the environment, are disposed of in a responsible way, or better yet: to see to it that the amount of harmful waste becomes increasingly less.

Another form of destruction is the apparent unrestrained deforestation. The high afforestation of our country and the low deforestation give us some right to speak on international forums. However, this cannot be an excuse to close our eyes to corruption, violation of the rights of the indigenous, and the pollution of and threat to bio-diversity and the delicate balance in our forests. When we take a look at a map of Suriname, we see that a frighteningly large portion of our country has already been given away in licenses and permits, while at the same time it does not seem possible to establish proper land rights for the Indigenous and Maroons.

Conversion in the relationship between humans

The manner in which we as humans relate to one another is also a cause for the damage we inflict upon nature. Sin caused a rupture between people. If we wish to reduce the amount of harmful waste that finds its way into nature, then it requires that every person make an important decision. Pollution is caused by human behaviour and lifestyles. To reduce pollution, the human person needs to change: a total reversal from consumerism and individualism to gratitude and solidarity. Gratitude because through creation, God gives us what we as human beings need to live, to share with one another and to be happy. Consumerism is in essence a sick desire only to acquire and to have. We consume to fill a great void in our souls, which is caused by growing individualism. The emptier the soul, the more we want to buy to fill that void. In a healthy community, people feed each other, both materially as well as spiritually and emotionally.

The human person is a social being and because of that there will always be a relationship of mutual dependence. As soon as that relationship is ruptured, for example through a distorted desire for freedom and independence, a gap arises which is subsequently filled by consumerism. A profound awareness of what we as humans really need in order to live and be happy leads to the choice for a sober life. Sobriety does not mean impoverishment, but the disciplined choice not to acquire more than we actually need. There is a lot we can learn about this from the way the indigenous people lived their lives for tens of thousands of years in harmony with nature. They acquired only what they needed at the moment for themselves and their families. They did not acquire to hoard or to trade. We can learn from their sense of community and we lament that togetherness is the first thing destroyed by modernity. Politics and commerce abuse, breach and undermine traditional indigenous leadership, and under the guise of democracy and development they sow division and in turn use that division to exploit the villages. An important question here is: what is genuine development? Although education is considered a crucial factor in development, new insights lead us to question if and how traditional Western oriented education does indeed contribute to those people whose wellbeing fundamentally depends on living in harmony with nature. Does education really lead to a strengthening of this identity?

Conversion in the relationship between humans and God

We live in a world that is dominated by the philosophy that the human person is capable of developing and improving himself and his surroundings infinitely and without

bounds. Pope Francis speaks of a technocratic paradigm: a way of thinking about reality that the human technological capacity is the ultimate measure (ruler) of life and as such gives the human person more power. In this thinking, the belief in God as origin and creator of all has no place. The human person is his own ultimate ruler. This only feeds the desire for power and ambition, which are in turn realized by an unbridled accumulation of material wealth, at the expense of fellow human beings and nature. This mentality maintains by necessity an economy that only serves the goal of the acquisition of material wealth. An undisputed instrument which the market economy employs to guarantee the flow of wealth, is the cultivation and promotion of consumerism. As long as people buy the flow remains in tact, even if people buy what they don't need. Essential to the method of consumerism is persuading the consumer in a very subtle way that he is not good enough, that what he possesses is not enough. This stands in stark contrast to the relationship between the human person and God: God created man, and saw that His creation was good, and in cohesion with the rest of creation, man was even very good! God gave man a garden as a gift, which he had to manage carefully, as a gesture of gratitude and fidelity of man to God, but also so that man could sustain his life. The technocratic paradigm has taken the place of God and teaches us that, as is demonstrated by the growing intellect of the human person and what he has achieved, we have the capacity for unlimited growth and the power to rule everything in this life without any limits. Furthermore, that the earth provides limitless resources which we can use. Humanity has as a result become slave to an all encompassing view, under the guise of freedom, to choose on his own. This rivets the ultimate break with God.

The passage from the Gospel of Luke about the temptation in the desert (Lk. 4:1-13) describes exactly these weaknesses of the human person that lead to sin. As human beings:

1. we possess the power to turn stones into bread, in other words the pretension that the human person has the power to manipulate creation and have control over everything;
2. we possess the power over all the kingdoms of the world, in other words that all the earth is the exclusive property of humankind and he can therefore do with it whatever he wills;
3. we are more powerful than God and capable of subduing God to man's will.

All these pretensions are based on the assumption that the human person is omnipotent. This pretension is false. In the same way the devil tried to do that with Jesus, so he does with humankind: he responds to human weakness and convinces him that he indeed does possess those powers.

Brothers and sisters,

when you embark upon a serious reflection on the need for an ecological conversion in this season of Lent, I would like to recall three important points of attention:

1. Conversion is not a snapshot event: it is a process – with relapse and progress – which lasts your whole life. It is something that occupies us daily, for example by a daily examination of conscience, making small steps in the good direction. The powers of evil will never abandon their efforts to tempt us to sin. On the contrary: the more the human person tries to come to conversion, the more evil will increase its attempts;
2. Conversion does not only happen on a personal level, but especially on a communal level. Ecological conversion is far-reaching and it is therefore necessary that this is a

communal effort. Although every person needs to make a conscious choice individually, the process is communal, whereby mutual encouragement, support and solidarity are the pillars of this process;

3. Each process is led by God's Spirit. When we consciously choose to convert our lives as individuals and as community, then it means in essence that we place our lives completely in God's hand and that we are profoundly aware that we cannot come to conversion independent of His grace.

Concrete steps

Lent cannot remain simply a period of fasting and reflection. It should however lead to a conversion that is made tangible. I would therefore like to make some suggestions how we can turn our intention for an ecological conversion into concrete acts.

- Nurture our children and youths with a love for creation and a deep ecological awareness. Schools can do the maintenance of the school yard together with the pupils, guide them to make it greener and more beautiful, teach them how to dispose waste responsibly, but above all help them to become aware why it is a good thing to do.
- Institutes of higher (vocational) learning in technology and science can be encouraged to engage in studies of the production of goods which are not a burden to the environment.
- Force timber industries to reforestation and that they not only focus on their short term profits, but that they also take into account the long term damage they cause.
- Encourage the Government, especially Parliament, to follow their conscience and take measures or even produce legislation which regulate the exploitation of nature, waste management, etc.
- A national endeavour to increasingly use sustainable consumer goods, such as environment friendly packaging material and cleaning agents.
- Parish communities can get concretely involved with communities in the interior, for example by establishing bonds with those communities and examine which possibilities there are for support and mutual enrichment.
- Finally, that all of us, the whole of society, but especially the community of faith, make ecological conversion a priority.

I wish you lots of devotion in fasting and a blessed preparation for Easter.

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