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*Theme: Living Faith: The Relevance of Religious Faith in The
Secularized Society in Sri Lanka*

Sub Theme: Spirituality, Mission and Pastoral Work

***Laudato si'* and Muthurajawela Wetland: An Investigative Study of Promoting
the Significance of Ecological Spirituality related Pastoral Work in Sri Lanka**

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Introduction

Catholic social teaching is a central and essential element of our faith. There are many innovative efforts by Catholic educators to communicate the social doctrine of the Church. "Living faith" leads directly to a "loving action" in the transformation of the world. Such a world view is to be found in the great wisdom embedded in Catholic Social Teachings (Doctrine), a great source of light and of faith (Ike 2024, 1). The themes of catholic social Teachings are part of the faith expressions of the church, these have immense social and humanitarian significance with replicable values. The positive outcome of the themes of catholic social thought is that these have helped the policy makers, academicians, social work practitioners and the general public in formulating policies and theoretical foundations for positive actions in their communities and societies. Hoped that the themes of catholic social thought would continue to influence and positively motivate them in their work of transformation of society in the years ahead (Puthenpura 2019, 63). United States Conference of Catholic Bishops highlights several of the key themes that are at the heart of our Catholic social teaching. Life and dignity of the human person, call to family, Community and participation, Rights and responsibilities, Option for the poor and vulnerable, The dignity of work and the Rights of workers, Solidarity, Care for the God's creation are the seven key themes of Catholic Social Teaching (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops 1998).

The focus on environmental issues is relatively recent in catholic social teaching. At first, there is a very anthropocentric approach, placing man at the center– one could say a dominant relationship to creation. It is seen in encyclicals such as Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* (1891), Pius XI's *Quas Primas* (1925), Pius XI's *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931), and even John XXIII's *Mater et Magistra* (1961). Vatican Council II retains an anthropocentric approach, but this time, a sense of justice, holiness and responsibility towards creation, is suggested. In the statement of the Synod of Bishops Justice in the World (1971), For the first time in the history of the Catholic Church, take a Creation-centered approach. In *Centesimus Annus* (1991) Pope John Paul II opened up new horizons in the area of Catholic social teaching to the modern world. He harnesses the creation-centered approach model to appeal to saving life on Earth, by emphasizing the intrinsic value of all life. In *Caritas in*

Veritate (2009) Pope Benedict arguably presents himself as a pioneer in the development of environmental consciousness. He seems to echo the theme of John Donne, “no man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent.” We are not alone; we are all somehow connected. The tone of *Caritas in Veritate* looks like the dominion model document, but at depth, it is tinged with a deep ecology model of social teaching. In the written document on the celebration of the World Day of Peace on 1 January 2010, Pope Benedict XVI argues that the quest for peace by people of good will surely become easier if all acknowledge the indivisible relationship between God, human beings and the whole of creation. The direction of Pope Benedict XVI and carrying it further comes Pope Francis in encyclical *Laudato si'* (Abeyasingha 2015, 5-7). It is the first social encyclical from Rome that integrates social justice with the ecological crisis. The problems of injustice in the world cannot be solved individually. As a practical recommendation, joining groups or organizations can certainly help us better care for our common home (Tutor 2019, 2012).

Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home, draws from the famous "Canticle of the Sun" by Saint Francis of Assisi, where he praises God for the beauty of creation. St. Francis of Assisi is the patron saint of all who study and work in the area of ecology. He was able to live with simplicity and in wonderful harmony with God, with others, with nature and with himself (*Laudato Si'*, 10). The encyclical consists of six chapters, each focusing on different aspects of the importance of God's creation and mankind's role as stewards of the Earth. And also it emphasizes the interconnectedness of all creatures, the moral implications of harming the environment, the importance of ecological education, spiritual growth, the role of faith and spirituality in motivating individuals to take action for the environment. "*Laudato Si'*, is more like a manifesto for a new humanism. So the ecology the encyclical speaks about is not an end in itself. It is ecology for the sake of humanity. It is not just a tile in the mosaic but the mosaic of life itself, to be constructed for its own sake and for future generations" (Vigini 2018, XII).

"Ecology" refers to the study of the relationships between living organisms and the environment in which they develop (*Laudato Si'*, 138). Etymology of the word "eco-logy", which derives from the Greek words "οικος" and "λογος" (Interdicasterial Working Group of the Holy See on Integral Ecology 2020, 9). In ancient Greek, "Oikos" means house, home and family. Logos is a Greek word meaning "word, discourse, study or reason". Ecology is the study of the *oikos* (house) and the household of living beings in relation to their environment. The Earth is home to all its living beings. According to Pope Francis's perspective, he repeatedly refers to "our common home" throughout *Laudato Si'* (J. Miller 2017, 53).

When we refer to spirituality, Christian spirituality proposes an alternative understanding of the quality of life, encourages a prophetic and contemplative lifestyle, one capable of deep enjoyment free of the obsession with consumption. Simplicity is a spiritual; attitude and it allows us to appreciate the small things, to be grateful for the opportunities (*Laudato Si'*, 222). A personal encounter with Jesus is the foundation of Christian spirituality. It has many implications for the natural environment. Living our vocation to be protectors of God's handiwork is essential to a life of virtue; it is not an optional or a secondary aspect of our Christian experience (*Laudato Si'*, 217). Ecological Spirituality is grounded in the convictions of our faith since the teachings of the Gospel have direct consequences for our way of thinking, feeling, and living. such spirituality can motivate us to a more passionate concern for the protection of our world (*Laudato Si'*, 216).

The encouragements toward a conscious implementation of ecological spirituality, the attitudes that make it possible to live and practice them in one's daily life on a personal and communal level. An ecological spirituality is very important and it is impossible to respond integrally

and responsibly to the needs of the common home or to the poor who are most affected by the ecological crisis without it (Platovnjak 2019, 90). “we are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental” (LS 139). *Laudato Si'* with regard to global warming and the concrete practical steps it recommends to fulfill our moral responsibility in confronting world-wide climate change (Thirimanna 2021, 94). Responding to the challenge of climate change through social love puts faith into action. Through *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis sends a personal invitation (J. Miller 2017, 248) to calling all people, especially Christians, to a serene attentiveness to the Creator and to all of creation (*Laudato Si'*, 226). He also calls for a greater research commitment to the study of ecosystems and their modifications (*Laudato Si'*, 42).

The Season of Creation has been adopted by several regional episcopal bodies (such as the Council of European Episcopal Conferences and the Episcopal Conference of Latin America), national Episcopal Conferences and dioceses worldwide, and has proved to be a very effective pastoral resource for helping the faithful to develop an ecological spirituality. A number of other significant initiatives have also been taken: in 2016 the Episcopal Conference of France proposed that the French Bishops designate representatives for integral ecology in each diocese, with the mission of promoting and supporting ecological conversion in their dioceses (Interdicasterial Working Group of the Holy See on Integral Ecology. 2020. 27-28). Some studies in the United States show that Christians are less responsible than non-believers to the environment. The survey, which was carried out to explore the understanding of the spirituality of Slovenian Catholics, suggests that in terms of attitude to the environment they do not differ much from other people. The results of this survey show that very few of them understand their spirituality in relationship with creation. The majority is not aware that they don't live their relationship with God, and thus their Christian spirituality, fully if their relationship to creation is not integrated into it. (Platovnjak 2019, 77).

In contextualizing the vision presented by the *Laudato Si'* within Sri Lankan Context, it is important to consider the one such urban wetland in Sri Lanka is Muthurajawela, the largest coastal peat bog on the island's West coast. There are 192 species of flora, 40 species of fish, 14 species of amphibians, 31 species of reptiles, 102 species of birds, and 22 species of mammals. Among the total vertebrate species documented, 17 are endemic, while 26 are nationally threatened. A total of 36 species of vertebrates are new records for Muthurajawela. The location of the Muthurajawela wetland in a rapidly developing urban area makes it an extremely vulnerable ecosystem. At present, this wetland is being rapidly degraded by inadequately planned development activities and other detrimental activities related to growing human population pressure (Bambaradeniya *et. al* 2002, 1). Ecological issues already of concern include habitat degradation and shrinkage and general loss of biodiversity and in-filling of the wetlands, while socio-economically, over-exploitation of natural resources and some localized aquaculture are also of concern. Further, on expanding population, rising poverty, changing livelihoods and sanitation barriers are important social factors. Muthurajawela is diverse wetland system located on western coastal belt on Sri Lanka covering four administrative divisions Ja-Ela, Katana, Wattala and Negombo. It was listed as one of 12 priority wetlands in Sri Lanka in 1996 and its northern part was declared as a wetland sanctuary (Nagabhatla, Nidi *et. al.* 2006, 4). Main objective of this study is to identify the challenges and opportunities for integrating ecological spirituality into pastoral work. The other objectives are to investigate awareness about Muthurajawela wetland and to study about ecological spirituality included in *Laudato Si'*. This research holds both academic and practical significance, contributing to various fields including ecological spirituality, environmental conservation, and pastoral work. And this research offers a framework for understanding how faith-based initiatives can be leveraged to

promote ecological sustainability, making it a significant contribution to both academic scholarship and practical pastoral work.

By exploring the ecological spirituality promoted in *Laudato Si'*, this study highlights the intersection between religious faith and environmental stewardship. It emphasizes the moral and spiritual responsibility of faith communities, particularly the Colombo Diocese, in Sri Lanka to protect natural ecosystems like the Muthurajawela Wetland. This contributes to broader discussions on how religious teachings can support global environmental initiatives. By examining the effectiveness of environmental education programs such as the “*Parisara Daham Pasala*”, the study provides practical recommendations for integrating ecological conservation into religious education and community outreach.

Methodology/Materials and methods

Research Design

This study adopts a Qualitative research approach to explore the ecological spirituality promoted by *Laudato Si'* and its application to pastoral work in the context of the Muthurajawela Wetland in Sri Lanka. A Qualitative approach was selected to gather data, allowing for an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences, perspectives, and interpretations regarding their relationship with the environment and faith.

Sampling procedure

The participants for this study were purposefully selected to represent a diverse group of stakeholders living in and around the Muthurajawela Wetland, who are either involved with or impacted by the ongoing ecological crisis in the area. The Muthurajawela Wetland is mainly located within the Pamunugama deanery of the Ja-Ela region in the Colombo Diocese. The population of the Pamunugama deanery was identified using secondary data from the Bishop's house library in Colombo. The sample included four parish priests from the Pamunugama deanery selected through random sampling to represent a cross-section of stakeholders.

Data Collection

Data was collected primarily through semi-structured interviews, allowing participants to express their thoughts and experiences freely while also adhering to a consistent set of questions. The interviews, which lasted between 45 minutes and one hour, focused on topics such as the integration of ecological principles in religious practices, personal beliefs about environmental stewardship and the role of the Church in promoting ecological awareness. This research employed thematic analysis to analyze the data.

Results and Discussion

In order to seriously confront the root causes of ecological crisis, we need a real “change of course” based on the awareness that everything is intimately related, as well as a “spiritual conversion” (*Laudato Si'* 202-221) capable of leading to a new consciousness of our relationship with ourselves, with others, with creation and with God. This calls for a long-term approach implemented in the places and spaces where education and culture are cultivated and handed down, where awareness is fostered, where political, scientific and economic responsibility is formed and, in general, responsible actions are carried out. A dialogue is not limited merely to the exchange of ideas, but involves, on the practical level, “working together” and, on the Synodal level, “walking together”. Such dialogue will also be an occasion for proclamation and for opening paths to the rediscovery of spirituality and to conversion, starting with our commitment to our common home. Pope Francis himself, from the very first lines of *Laudato Si'*, expresses the desire “to enter into

dialogue with all people about our common home” (*Laudato Si’* 3) and the sixth chapter of *Laudato Si’*, which deals with education and spirituality (*Laudato Si’* 202-246).

In this section of the research is structured to provide a comprehensive analysis of the qualitative data and a critical discussion on how these results relate to the theoretical framework of *Laudato Si’*, particularly in the context of ecological spirituality and pastoral work within the Muthurajawela Wetland area. The results offer insights into the participants' understanding and experiences regarding ecological spirituality, the role of the Church in environmental conservation. First, the researcher analyzed the data collected through in-depth interview, from a sample that included four parish priests from the Pamunugama Deanery. Following measures are included in that semi-structured Questionnaire.

- **Role of the parish priest** - One of the priests believed that he was entrusted with full responsibility for the spiritual and social life of the people in his parish. The second priest believed that a priest's role is to lead diverse people toward unity, a responsibility that should be fulfilled by strengthening their faith and spiritual life. The third priest believed that a priest follows in the footsteps of Jesus and has the power to bring people closer to God, which he sees as his primary role. The fourth priest's opinion was that a priest has a teaching role, while also being responsible for performing rituals such as the Eucharist and administering the sacraments. Even though they described their work in different ways, all the priests generally agreed that it was not an easy task.
- **Main themes/topics use in Sunday mass** - All the priests believed that their sermons should be based on the specific biblical readings for the day. Additionally, four priests thought that Sunday sermons should incorporate aspects of ordinary people's lives to preach in a way that resonates with the spiritual lives of Christians. They mentioned that, in general, they address themes such as the Kingdom of God, current events in the modern world, the development of communication, the deterioration of human attitudes, marital and family life issues in their sermons. However, one priest's approach stood out from these general responses. He mentioned that he incorporates various themes in his preaching, focusing on how to practice faith as a central topic. He also discussed the stability of Christians in the political sphere amidst changing political circumstances and noted that he includes environmental issues, specifically concerning Muthurajawela, in his sermons.
- **Current social issues of their parish** – All five priests highlighted drug-related issues, family breakdown, marital problems, challenges faced by the fishing community, economic struggles, and environmental concerns as prevalent social problems in their communities. Fishing community's livelihood is closely connected to the environment. Additionally, the priests mentioned the environmental damage caused by the *X-Press Pearl* disaster, as well as issues related to garbage and waste disposal within the Muthurajawela ecosystem.
- **Practical measures taken to solve current social issues** – All the priest said that they are privately discussing these matters, offering guidance, and leading the people in public affairs.
- **Awareness about Catholic Social encyclicals** - All the priests agreed that there is a general lack of understanding about Catholic social encyclicals among the common people. While only two priests have not directly discussed or preached about these encyclicals, their values have been mentioned in a general sense in certain cases. Only these two priests specifically referenced the names of two Catholic social encyclicals whose values they conveyed: *Laudato Si’* and the Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, both of which were recently written by Pope Francis. One priest did not mention any encyclicals by name and has not made any effort to raise awareness among the people, believing it to be ineffective for those

who are only focused on rituals. The fourth priest mentioned that among the young children, especially the Sunday school teachers, there is awareness about social encyclicals because of their high education.

- **Awareness on environmental issues regarding Muthurajawela Wetland** – All the priests demonstrated some awareness of the importance of the Muthurajawela ecosystem and the environmental damage it has suffered. However, one priest exhibited a deeper understanding of the ecosystem, with a keen awareness of the frequent changes occurring within it.
- **Practical involvement in environmental issues related to Muthurajawela** - Two priests have not directly intervened in any course of action regarding this matter. However, two other priests have actively worked on the Muthurajawela environmental crisis, with one making a significant contribution to its preservation. This priest has also taken legal action to protect Muthurajawela and taken the leadership to form the organization of “Archdiocese Committee for Protecting Muthurajawela”. He mentioned that efforts to conserve the ecosystem are ongoing as needed.
- **Contribution to environmental conservation projects in their parish** - Two priests have led various religious projects to nurture the spiritual lives of the people but have not initiated any projects for environmental conservation in their parishes. However, two other priests invited environmentalist Dinusha Nanayakkara, who lives in the Bopitiya area, to conduct two environmental programs aimed at increasing the environmental literacy of Sunday school children. One of these priests organizes an annual project to provide food to those severely affected by floods in the Bopitiya area. On the day of confirmation, each child is given a plant, a tradition that continues. Additionally, the priest has arranged for the celebration of Environment Day every year in the Sunday school.
- **Suggestions for socializing catholic social encyclicals** - All the priests believed that organizing programs focused on the conservation of ecosystems, including Muthurajawela, along with awareness programs on *Laudato Si'*, would be highly beneficial for the community. However, they emphasized that these initiatives should be conducted regularly, at least once a month, rather than just once a year. They felt that consistent reminders and attention to these issues would help raise awareness to a meaningful level. The priests also noted that the community's low environmental literacy contributes to the degradation of the surrounding ecosystems. They believe it is especially important to implement such programs for Sunday school teachers.

As a result, many Catholics are unfamiliar with the basic content of Catholic social teaching, and do not fully understand that the Church's social teaching is an essential part of the Catholic faith. Catholic education and catechesis are key channels for conveying this teaching. There is an urgent need to strengthen our commitment to sharing Catholic social teaching at every level of Catholic education and faith formation. Caritas, or Sedec, an institution that promotes Catholic social encyclicals, works to revive and apply the religious knowledge provided by the Church in practical ways. Programs should be designed in collaboration with such institutions to integrate this teaching into everyday life. This approach aligns with the implementation of the vision set forth in *Laudato Si'*.

In 1991, at a conference held in Hong Kong Father Aloysius Peiris highlighted the need for the catholic social teachings and it should be done in a way that is specific to each country. He Asking them to wake up to the reality of their respective countries (Fernando, 1993, 11). Catholic Social teaching is known as a 'Best Kept Secret' (Edward P. deBerri et al. 1987, 254). This research clearly

highlights the importance of implementing programs to raise environmental awareness among Sunday school children and teachers. young people have a new ecological sensitivity and a generous spirit, and some of them are making admirable efforts to protect the environment (*Laudato Si'*, 209). Good education plants seeds when we are young, and these continue to bear fruit throughout life (*Laudato Si'* 213).

In response to this need, I propose the concept of the 'Environmental Sunday School' program (*Parisara daham pasala*), which has been initiated and maintained for about a year as an alternative approach. The primary objective of this program is to enhance environmental literacy among Sunday school teachers and children. It is carried out through the collaboration of four individuals, including the researcher of this paper. To date, six programs have been implemented under the 'Environmental Sunday School program' (*parisara daham pasala*) initiative, focusing on the dioceses of Anuradhapura, Chilaw, and Colombo. The most recent program was a national teacher training session held at the Thewatta National Basilica Shrine, where 52 Sunday school teachers from 10 dioceses participated. This event, organized on August 31, 2024; was led by Reverend Father Bennett Shantha Fernando, Director of National Catechism and Bible Services. A Feedback was collected from the participating Sunday school teachers after the program. They suggested that this program should be expanded at the dioceses, parishes, and Sunday school levels. The theme of the lecture focused on explaining *Laudato Si'* and the Muthurajawela ecosystem within the context of developing environmental theology. This theme has the potential to be promoted further, particularly in the Ja-Ela region, with the support of bishops and national catechetical directors. This initiative serves as one example of how each of us can contribute to the implementation of awareness programs like this. For the formation of ecological spirituality, the correct ecological education is needed. According to Pope Francis Environment education should facilitate making the leap towards the transcendent which gives ecological ethics its deepest meaning. The transcendent is an important element of all religions. Ecological education has a high spiritual goal. (*Laudato Si'*, 210).

Another action that can be taken is to increase environmental literacy by incorporating the vision of *Laudato Si'* into the Catholic catechism. Ecological Spirituality recovers a religious vision of God's creation and encourages greater contact with the natural world in a spirit of wonder, praise, joy and gratitude. Encouraging community reflection on the themes of *Laudato Si'* by parish priests during liturgical celebrations, providing study and prayer guides are essential. The Catechism speaks about the pastoral responsibilities of bishops and priests, highlighting their role in guiding, teaching, and sanctifying the people of God. "The pastoral care of the parish is entrusted to a pastor as its own shepherd under the authority of the diocesan bishop." (CCC 1560). Pastoral work is closely linked with administering the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, reconciliation, and anointing of the sick, as these are the means by which the faithful receive grace and guidance. And also includes the responsibility for catechesis teaching the faith to all members of the Church, from children to adults. The Scriptures say, "Without a vision the people perish" (Prov. 29:18). As Catholics, we have an inspiring vision in our social teaching. We further encourage continuing formation of priests so they can more effectively preach, teach, and share the *Laudato Si'* and its concrete implications for our time.

Through our worship of God, we are invited to embrace the world on a different way. The Eucharist joins heaven and earth; it embraces and penetrates all creation and it is also a source of light and motivation for our concerns for the environment, directing us to be stewards of all creation (*Laudato Si'*, 236). Sunday Eucharistic participation has special importance. Sunday, is meant to be a day which heals our relationships with God, with ourselves, with others and with the world. And it is the day of the Resurrection, the "first day" of the new creation, whose first fruits are the Lord's

risen humanity, the pledge of the final transfiguration of all created reality. It proclaims man's eternal rest in God. Day of the rest centered on the Eucharist, sheds its light on the whole week and motivates us to concern for nature and poor (*Laudato Si'*, 237). Pope Francis says "a loving awareness that we are not disconnected from the rest of creatures, but joined in a splendid universal communion" (*Laudato Si'* 220). The cultivation of a "loving awareness" is critical to our capacity to renew our relationship with the created world, to rediscover our own deep communion with the world (J. Miller 2017, 111).

Conclusion

In conclusion, it should be stated that ecological spirituality, according to the thought of Pope Francis, allows a new approach to the relationship with God, man and nature. Care for the earth is a fundamental requirement of our faith. We are called to protect people and the planet, living our faith in relationship with all of God's creation. Religious faith motivates individuals to take action for the environment, even in a secularized society. *Laudato Si'* provides guiding principles that promote environmental action, which can be applied to address environmental degradation on a global scale. In Sri Lanka, the Muthurajawela ecosystem, located within the Colombo Diocese is home to a significant portion of the country's Catholic population. This community bears a special responsibility to demonstrate their faith by actively engaging in the protection and preservation of this vital wetland. Our seminaries, colleges, schools, and catechetical institutes are called to impart not only abstract principles but also a moral framework for practical, everyday action. I propose that a research symposium be held in the seminary to promote the teachings of Catholic social thought, with a particular focus on *Laudato Si'*.

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