

Today's crucified: exploring christian ecological challenges with an african heart

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MEMORIES AND EXPERIENCES LEADING TO THIS REFLECTION

"We do not inherit the land from our ancestors... we borrow it from our children." Native American ancestral wisdom on land use.

Syündothè, my grandmother was an herbalist and traditional healer. King'aa, my grandfather is buried under a *muange* tree in the arid countryside of Kathula Village in Mwingi, Kenya. Kinyua, my neighbor drowned in Mukongoro Stream while three Josephs live in our memories in the grass and trees planted to remember them. I accord true affection to so many rural poor who brought me up and whose life depends on the Earth and rain. I recall with gratitude and appreciation the Passionist brethren who turned Karungu [South Nyanza] into the oasis of green garden. Onyango Rabala, a Passionist missionary, among others, kept the *green dream* alive over the years of their ministry among our people.



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FORMATION AND CATECHESIS



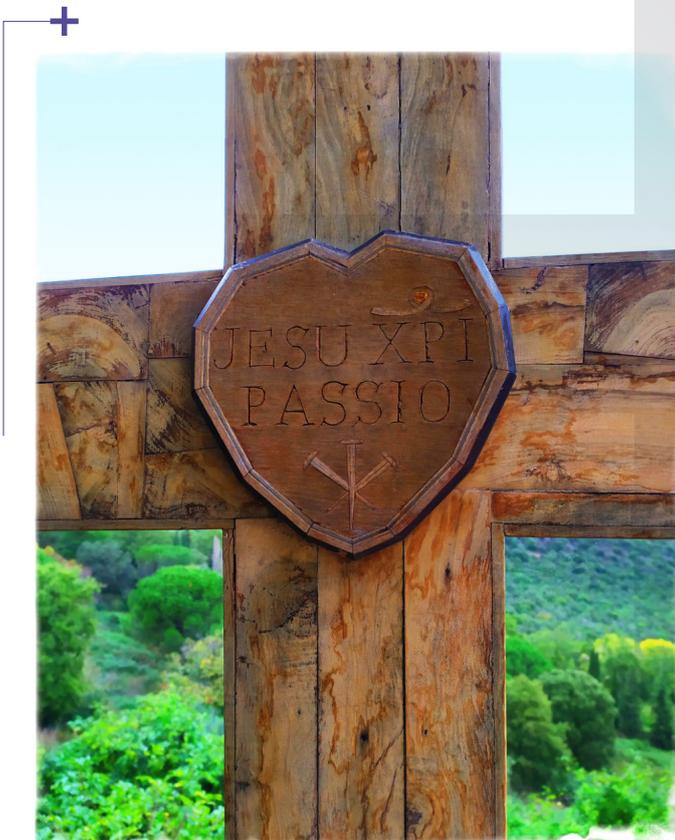
MEETINGS AND UN FORUM CONFERENCES

In 2006 the Passionist General Council appointed me into the then Commission of Solidarity, Justice and Peace and the Integrity of Creation. I happened to be in Rome for a brief course of evangelization and was able to participate in a meeting that discussed solidarity as a new way of being Passionists in our world in our times. I met several Passionist elders among them the representative to the UN in New York, Fr. Kevin Dance. The last of these commission meetings was scheduled for September that same year in the Minsteracres Retreat House in Northumberland, Newcastle, in the United Kingdom. I attended this meeting that discussed ways of living out this solidarity in the restructuring process of the Passionist Congre-

gation. Here an eminent member of the Passionist Family, Fr. Steve Dunn, one of the co-founders of the Elliot Allen Institute of Theology and Ecology in Canada shared the great work they had done constructing the first ever green church in Canada. He also showed us photos of the famous Passionist cosmologist of *The Universe Story*, Fr. Thomas Berry. Later, I worked in this parish for about three years before being appointed to Passionists International at the UN in New York.

That same year in September the two-week United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change was held in Nairobi Kenya. Climate change, global warming, mitigation, greenhouse gases, land use and land use change and a sea of acronyms marked our first week experience of the conference. Eventually and slowly the same message was repeated over and over about the role of human interference with ecology and nature. Greenhouse gas emissions must be reduced to avoid further atmospheric global warming. We heard about CDM: Clean Development Mechanisms and renewable energy: solar, wind, water energy sources to replace fossil fuels that have so far been responsible for most of the atmospheric pollution.

The conference was a great eye opener in my faith experience as it kept raising justice issues. Environmental degradation was therefore clearly seen as a **challenge** to world faith expressions. Does our Christian faith still possess foundations and resources to respond to such challenges posed by global warming and climate change? Does African religious faith experiences have anything to offer as traditional spiritual resources for Earth-care and environmental conservation? I came home with these and more questions every evening. The last few days, the different Christian Churches represented in the Conference got together and met the country minister of Environment and Natural Resources and the prominent environmentalist and Nobel peace prize laureate, Wangari Maathai. These expressed their gratitude to see the Churches represented in the conference and were happy that the message would go far to the grass root people represented by the faith groups. A one-page statement was produced for press release by the Churches. Among other things this press release statement recommended the introduction of basic environmental awareness courses in our schools, seminaries, and formation houses. The publication and implementation of such statements could take long to achieve





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due to methodology and competing needs among concerns in the Church and the time required to shape curriculum and prepare material for study resources. About ten years later, Pope Francis wrote *Laudato Si' - Encyclical Letter on Care for our Common Home*. Can anyone sense my great joy and excitement hearing such great news?

Back in the Passionist Retreat Centre when I guided retreat sessions, I began to integrate more of the ecological awareness I had awakened to during these meetings and conferences. In our village where over thirty years the effects of environmental degradation were so evident, we mobilized the people to conserve and to share water and to plant trees. Tree seedlings and organic manure subsistence farming and nutrition demonstration sessions for young mothers are all becoming part of the broader expression of this ecological care and awareness. Fifteen years have gone by since and yet the freshness and the urgency of responding to environmental issues has remained and deepened in me. Time is passing and we are at the edges; it is our last chance to win the war against climate change.

HEALING THE EARTH AND OURSELVES AS OUR CENTRAL CHALLENGE

Both Thomas Berry and Wangari Maathai have since passed on during these last few years but their inspiration and scholarship have just begun rather than ended. They have passed the baton to our generation and to future generations through those that they inspired. They have eloquently pointed to the great work of **the unfolding of God's creative word in the natural world** as did great saints and wise members of the human family. It is time to implement the lessons they taught us and to respond to the challenges they have posed to humans. That time is now. *Laudato Si'* expresses this spirit quite eloquently in six chapters:

Chapter One: What Is Happening to our Common Home. **Chapter Two:** The Gospel of Creation. **Chapter Three:** The Human Roots of the Ecological Crisis. **Chapter Four:** Integral Ecology. **Chapter Five:** Lines of Approach and Action. **Chapter Six:** Ecological Education and Spirituality.

WHAT CAN WE DO?

Perhaps the covid-19 pandemic time can help humanity to reflect more on what we have done to Mother Earth and to ourselves. We need to reconsider and deepen our action for Earth's **healing**

as this includes our own healing too. We might wish to put into our hearts the prayer for our Earth, part of which reads:

O God of the poor, help us to rescue the abandoned and forgotten of this Earth, So precious in your eyes. Bring healing to our lives, That we may protect the world and not to prey on it, That we may sow beauty, not pollution and destruction. Amen. May it be.

