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When the Integral Meets African Ethics: Contextualizing *Laudato SI'*

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Abstract: The concept of the integral speaks to the holistic nature of the globe. It is predicated on the claim that everything/everyone is related, and the destruction of one is the destruction of the whole. As such, it places a moral burden on each part to work towards the preservation and dignity of the whole. This ethics of union is aptly captured in *Laudato Si'* (On Care for Our Common Home), a papal encyclical of Pope Francis. African moral theory perfectly captures this ethic: *I am because we are*. What this communal ethic does is constantly maintain the view that humans are interconnected to one another. We interrogate how this communalistic approach of the African is implicated and vindicated in integral ecology and the special place *Laudato Si'* holds in the world. The end is to justify both the African and ecclesiastical approaches as decolonial ecology and then see how the uniqueness of both approaches can birth a universal approach. However, to achieve our aim, we employ the method of conversation that comes from the African place. We choose conversation because we believe that *Laudato Si'* promotes a 'theology from the borders'. If our statement is true, then we will best be able to project our argument using a method that comes from the borders but is universally possible in its application.

Keywords: African communalism; ecology; human dignity; integral; *Laudato Si'*

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1. Introduction

The concept of integral ecology was first discovered in Hilary Moore's *Marine Ecology* (Varanda 2024, pp. 11–12). The use of the concept is borne out of the limitation of a reductionist perception of the human being and the environment. It states clearly that every aspect of life is connected. After Moore's use of the concept in 1958, other scholars have used it within the context of Hilary Moore. However, the concept gained popularity in the 21st century with its use by Pope Francis. Prior to the use of integral ecology in Catholic teaching by Pope Francis, Integral Human Development (IHD) was also resoundingly expressed during the period of the American Declaration of Independence in 1776, when Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass, among others, re-emphasized the need to fulfill the promise that all human beings are created equal (McGreevy 2021). According to IHD, development goes beyond "having more" to "being more". The first time IHD appeared in Catholic teaching was in the *Populorum Progressio*, a social encyclical of Paul VI published in 1967. The document stresses the need and relevance of total and not selective human development. *Populorum Progressio* sees IHD as the central theme of Catholic social teachings. Pope Paul VI clarifies through the document that IHD is the opposite of free trade, a part of capitalism. Here, authentic development can only be advanced, obtainable and retainable by establishing conditions that make it easy for people to improve their skills or potential as agents. Genuine development must be holistic, encompassing and devoid of discrimination, deprivation and exploitation. This document is known for its anticapitalistic stance. However, a gap needed to be filled in the IHD: its primary focus was

on the human person, neglecting the environment, which is the human's natural habitat. This restrictive use became the strength of *Laudato Si'*.

Although it is clear that the concept of the integral predates Pope Francis, we primarily interface with his idea of the integral as an offshoot of *Laudato Si'*. The focus of this section is strictly on the ecology of Pope Francis. In the following section, we interrogate the concept of African ethics, sieving its main distinctiveness. Next comes the relationship between African ethics and integral ecology. We did not bother to know whether African ethics predates integral ecology and vice versa. However, we interrogate the areas of relationship and the difference, if any, of both relational theories, because these two ideas come from different perspectives. This leads us to a possible union of both theories as a single relational framework. This section also explains how the integral fits into decolonial ethics.

2. The Concept of the Integral (Human Development) in Pope Francis

Francis maintains continuity with his predecessors' use of 'human and natural ecology', but they are now mutually embedded. IHD is part of the integral, which explains the bracketing of human development. Everything in the universe is connected, and each must be cherished and respected because "all of us as living creatures are dependent on one another" (LS 42). Pope Francis refers to this interconnectedness as a "mysterious network of relations between things" (LS 20), "the complex network of ecosystems" (LS 134), a network that we cannot fully explore and understand. According to Donal Dorr (2015), the marked difference between Francis and his predecessors, especially John Paul II and Benedict XVI, is the fact that they were inclined to contrast on the one hand human ecology with nature ecology on the other. While they argued for mutual respect between the two, they did not press for integration, unlike Francis. It is, therefore, a development by Francis to link human and natural ecology. In taking an integral approach, Dorr maintained that Francis highlights two significant themes: first, that we share DNA with the animals and plants, and we should respect them. Second, the difference is that we have a responsibility for them. We see God in them, and this is the radical part of Pope Francis' integral ecology from a spiritual point of view, seeing God in nature. What differentiates integral ecology from IHD is that while the former is holistic, focusing on reality in general, the latter focuses on an aspect of reality. As such, IHD is an arm of integral ecology, if by integral ecology we mean the relationship within the whole of nature. IHD is critical to understanding the concept of the integral because we believe that an individual should enjoy some forms of wholeness before they can share such forms with other forms of life.

IHD is multi-dimensional and is not concerned with material poverty alone, because the conceptualization of poverty goes beyond the domain of money. The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (2013) asserts that poverty can take several dimensions, extending to freedom, health, education and happiness, which should be the ultimate development goal. With IHD, "development cannot be limited to mere economic growth. In order to be authentic, it must be complete: integral, that is, it has to promote the good of every person and the whole person" (Paul VI 1967, p. 14). Development is both personal and communal. Personal development should occur as the community develops. The community and people depend on one another for IHD to be achieved. The social teaching of the Catholic Church supports and promotes integral human development for every community, person and people. IHD, as such, needs an understanding of the human person that is transcendent. This aspiration for the transcendent is necessary to avoid situations where human beings picture themselves as the absolute and, in that guise, think that they are solely responsible for their redemption. When that happens, some people become victims of such a mindset and become dehumanized in the process. Therefore, the vision of eternal life reminds humans of their limitations (Turkson 2018, pp. 199–209).

3. A Discourse on *Laudato Si'*

Integral ecology is the foundation of *Laudato Si'*, which means that humans should have some functions and be responsible towards nature. It invites humans to get involved

with the environment. The creation story of Genesis has led to a misinterpretation of scripture and the manipulation of humans. The call of God to humans, to take charge and have dominion over the earth and all that is in it, is a call to take care of and protect the earth: "Nature cannot be regarded as something separate from ourselves or as a mere setting in which we live. We are part of nature, included in it and thus in constant interaction with it" (LS 139). It is an act of carelessness to destroy that which has always been there before the creation of the human race. The entire disregard for the ecosystem arises out of human greed to prioritize the use of technology over the wellness of humans. Capitalists and/or the wealthy have developed ways to manipulate the ecosystem so that, while the environment deteriorates, modern technology has enabled the channeling of the consequences of their actions to the poor. In the final analysis, those responsible for the problem are not readily available to suffer the consequences, since the poor cannot afford the luxury of an eco-friendly environment due to their economic status.

The very first paragraph of *Laudato Si'*, which re-echoes Francis of Assisi's exaltation of God through God's creation, explains Pope Francis' interest in agroecology: "Praise be to you, my Lord, through our Sister, Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us, and who produces various fruit with coloured flowers and herbs" (LS1). Pope Francis went further in the next paragraph to lament how humans' misuse of the earth leads to gradual degradation and threatens our shared future. He explains the importance of plants and all other green vegetation, from which we can obtain bodily sustenance and live healthily. He speaks of the herbivores that need this green vegetation to survive and the carnivores that need to feed on the herbivores for their sustenance. Their deposits nourish the earth and keep the green environment from degradation. This mutually enriching interconnectedness is an obvious case of community at work, where every living being needs each other to keep life going. If there is going to be an extinction of one, it will indeed, to a large extent, affect the existence of others. This clearly shows how a vicious circle of degradation can lead to a vicious circle of threats to living beings. At this point, Pope Francis's question, "what is happening to our common home?" makes more sense. Matthew Whelan says that the problem is bivalent, both theological and anthropological. It is theological because it relates to God, who creates the world, and anthropological because humans have been given the mandate as trustees to hold the entire creation in trust for the creator. The consequence of the mismanagement of such trust is part of *Laudato Si'*s concern, since it has a ripple effect on our shared existence. Francis is not bothered about natural agricultural activities that nourish living organisms. His emphasis is on using modern technology for agricultural production that purports to improve life while at the same time destroying life. He refers to this group of agro-ecologists as those who use the 'technocratic paradigm' to impact the world negatively. Here, then, Pope Francis recommends some level of subsistence agriculture, where humans and other living organisms can responsibly feed on green vegetation as a source of livelihood. To some extent, technology has taken away community and made it possible for machines to carry out agricultural activities, albeit to the detriment of the human person.

The style of technocratic paradigm being referred to is typical of the South African condition, where subsistence farming is not encouraged, and those disadvantaged economically find it challenging to grow their food on a small scale. The technocratic paradigm follows the logic of a neoliberal system that prioritizes profit over human well-being. Large industrial farmers become the sole determinants of managing the agricultural sector. Since profit takes priority over human beings, the technocratic paradigm receives a further boost from the proponents of GMOs, to the point that even the seeds that are planted are affected by neoliberal policies that skew some people out of agriculture manufacturing. Under a subsistence management system, people can grow their crops in whatever small measures they deem fit, and for some time, this makes it possible for people to be self-reliant. In most instances, people can also preserve some of their crops and grow them for a new season, and it continues ad infinitum. However, the technocratic paradigm amplified terminator seedlings, making it impossible for people to preserve and grow crops for subsequent

seasons. The implication for small-scale farmers is that they must struggle to buy seeds to grow every season, since terminator seeds are programmed not to be replanted after harvest. Technology, in this sense, is not bad, for it is always helpful to improve life. It is, however, harmful to the extent that it is used as a force for evil. One clear thing about Pope Francis is that nothing in the whole of creation is useless, and nothing should be left out in the enhancement of the world.

Clemens Sedmak (2022, p. 156) notes that there is usually a conflict between means and ends, amplified by neoliberalist activities, since the end always justifies the means. It does not matter how one can get a job done and who is negatively affected by such acts; once results are achieved, those acts will be justified. A theology of integral human development encouraged by *Laudato Si'* "is committed to bridging this gap between means and ends, between external progress and inner growth; it is committed to integrating our technological possibilities into our moral and spiritual identity". Human life, encountered to its fullest, is based on compassion for one another. Compassion, in this sense, is a communion with all those who have zeal and have committed to forging a common human destiny and creating avenues for fulfilling such a destiny. It means that every action of an individual is carried out with the consequences in mind, not just for the self but for others.

The damage to the ecosystem and the issues raised in *Laudato Si'* are typical of a lifestyle of reckless affluence. Sedmak (pp. 155–56) highlights some links to *Laudato Si'*. He mentioned that Pope Francis connected the inner and outer world; the second is between the ecological and the social, and the third is between knowledge and pain. Some issues are also raised in *Laudato Si'*: rapidification, technocratic paradigm, too much anthropocentrism, morbid individualism and extractive economics. All these issues lead to one problem: nature is seen as an object of manipulation. Pope Francis acknowledged that everyone and all nations have a responsibility towards the planet, and that responsibility is not limited to the most industrialized countries. However, he also noted that through their activities, the industrialized global north bears more culpability and, as such, owes poor nations some 'ecological debt'.

The prosperity of the global north came at the cost of the environment. The consumerist and extractive cultures are also essential products of the Western nations. In the twenty-first century, other countries from the global south have joined in the race of the degradation of the environment. They should, therefore, make more investments in sanitizing the environment for the benefit of all. He criticized the notion of humans constantly attempting to take the place of God. This does not mean that the world's poor nations should fold their arms and wait for the West to solve the ecological crisis alone. In their various environments, they must also serve as voices of change through eradicating corruption in their countries. The same culture of extraction and consumerism has found its way into poor countries, and like the West, the first beneficiaries for now are the indigenous imperialists of those nations. There should be a responsible freedom that prioritizes humans and the environment. Everyone should create a balance based on an ethic of responsibility in all dealings.

Although we are not sure whether Pope Francis prefers the modern or the premodern, Anthony Mills (2015, pp. 44–55) claims that what Pope Francis rejects is not modernity but modernism. Mills distinguished these two ideologies. He described modernity as a historical period that started in Europe after the Middle Ages and extended into the present. In this way, Pope Francis acknowledged that science and technology brought basic infrastructure and reliable energy and contributed to alleviating human suffering to some extent. However, modernism, on the other hand, is an ideological drive within modernity that constantly seeks to explain and interpret modernity in a particular light. Mills described progressivism, individualism, liberalism and so on as forms of modernism.

What makes *Laudato Si* an outstanding document is not that its ideas are new per se, but that it emphasizes a comprehensive connectedness that links environmental concerns with the traditional concerns of Catholic Social Teaching for the poor. He states unambiguously, "We are not faced with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but

rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental" (LS 139). This integral approach involves joining together questions of justice, combating poverty, and protecting nature.

In *Laudato Si'* (137–142), Pope Francis shows how economic life cannot be divorced from biological life and how the activities of industries affect the environment. "It cannot be emphasized enough how everything is interconnected. Time and space are not independent of one another, and not even atoms or subatomic particles can be considered in isolation. Just as the different aspects of the planet—physical, chemical and biological—are interrelated, so too living species are part of a network which we will never fully explore and understand. A good part of our genetic code is shared by many living beings" (LS 138). Even the concept of sustainable development is hinged on the claim that because everything is interrelated, the trio of economic development, environmental protection and social equity can only be achieved when the idea of bifurcation is shelved (Porras 2016, p. 139). A fragmented society stems from fragmented knowledge, and it is based on ignorance of what constitutes the whole.

The integral is further evident in Francis' fierce critique of uncontrolled capitalism. He emphasized his point in the documents *Evangelii Gaudium* and *Laudato Si'*. In both documents, Francis emphasized the unjust structure based on economic market growth that is not focused on humanity. He says that inequality is the basis upon which vices like poverty, violence, war, etc., thrive. The mass production of arms and force cannot be used to curtail violence in the world until its root cause, which is inequality, is checked. He has had a notable number of critics, especially from the West (primarily right-wing politicians who are global warming deniers) (Goldenberg 2015).

Pope Francis hinges his criticism of neoliberal policies on the ideology of the market (Dalton 2020, pp. 237–46), which Kate Ward (2020, pp. 77–90) calls hyperagency. This market ideology places a priority on profit and neglects human value and conscience. For the ideology of the market, the end justifies the means, and it is inconsequential whether such a mindset depreciates the lives of human beings. For this ideology, problem-solving means a company can declare large sums of money for its few big investors. It eventually leaves the majority of the people of the world, especially in the global south, in perpetual poverty. Technological development that has no place for humanity defies true progress. Science and technology promise unlimited progress and satisfaction. However, global inequality shows that very few capitalists are beneficiaries of such progress. These capitalists make use of multimillion-dollar advertisements, marketing strategies and research to convince people to embrace their agenda (Rabin-Havt and Media Matters for America 2016) and "people can easily get caught up in a whirlwind of needless buying and spending" (LS 203).

Pope Francis further buttressed this point through the economy of exclusion that characterizes the technocratic age. Under this scenario, industrial capitalism foists its lifestyle on the public, all to the benefit of the capitalists. With this happening, people are no longer pushed to the borders but become chattels. Again, Pope Francis opines that it is not the free market in itself that is under attack but a kind of system that creates disequilibrium by deifying the free market to an absolutistic level. Moreover, under this absolutistic model, since the human person is a chattel, there is a shift "into a relativistic ideology which reduces human activity to selfishness, hedonism, and utilitarianism. In this way, man himself, being merely a portion of matter with the ability to think, ends up becoming just another resource to be thrown out when no longer materially useful" (Gallagher 2016, pp. 12–25).

We choose to end this section with an emphasis on the background to *Laudato Si'* as given by Scott Powell (2020, p. 21). The Catholic Church sees the world as an essential part of creation. The problem with the environmental crisis also includes religious people who are denialists. In particular, Christians have promoted a view of the world that signals detachment and dichotomy. Powell notes that when God created the world, God was in harmony with man, and he handed the world over to humans to oversee. The creation of the world, together with the guardianship God gave to humans, shows the priority

God gave to his creative works. The implication is that the creator desired to meet his handiworks in good or even better shape than it was handed to humans. To take care of a thing signals trust and a relationship. This relationship with the creator solidified human relationships with one another. However, there was a misuse of divine trust through the destruction of the environment, which led to a friction in harmony between God and humans, and between humans themselves. In all these, three relationships were altered between humans and God, humans and the environment, and amongst humans themselves. With this rupture, humans have also placed too much emphasis on the hereafter, to the world's detriment. This is implicated in even some of the activities that Christians carry out. People are misled towards the emergence of a second coming that makes them contemplate that 'this world is not their home'. Powell resounds it in explaining Paul's letter to the Romans (8:19): creation waits with eager longing for the revelation of the children of God. It means that "[t]he world of nature . . . is waiting for Christians to live out their redemption". The admonitions of Christ and Paul show that the world never ended with the 'original sin', and it is bound to continue in existence. "If Christianity is merely a waiting period for the return of Christ and the obliteration of the space-time world, then the environment is, indeed, a misguided concern". Maintaining the chain of relationships between the supernatural, humans, and the ecosystem guarantees wholeness in nature. We turn to the African cultural framework to examine this relationship in nature.

4. African Ethical Framework

We make it clear in this section that the African ethical framework is not founded on theology but on culture. As such, our interest here is in how the idea of relationship through the communal structure of Africa is interwoven. Our perspective here is analyzing African scholars' views of communal relationships. It is also worth noting that African philosophers have conducted detailed research in this regard. We understand that every society has uniqueness, but some features bind them. In the case of Africa, communalism is considered the bedrock of traditional African societies. The concept of African ethics is framed along the path of this communal relationship. To this effect, the justification of moral principles is largely determined by the individual's compliance with societal norms. The individual is part and parcel of a community, and every activity carried out by any individual should be carried out with the idea of the larger group in mind. This mentality is adequately summarized in the phrase by John Mbiti (1970, p. 141): 'I am because we are'. In different African communities, there is a justification for the existence of the above phrase. We do not say that it does not exist in other societies outside Africa. Again, we are not justifying the absence of individualism in different African communities, for doing that would describe an ideal that may not be found in any part of the world. However, it is very clear from the claims of different African communities that the possession of individual moral worth is primarily a function of the normative evaluation of the individual in relation to the community. As such, the community, and not the individual, animates morality.

Communalism, therefore, becomes the code of conduct by which the society should be governed. When an individual treats other community members rightly, such an individual is said to possess moral worth. There is also a sense in which a particular community prescribes laws or norms, and everyone is expected to abide by such norms. This then determines whether an individual qualifies as a person from the African perspective. This idea is championed by Ifeanyi Menkiti (Negedu 2023, p. 290) through his normative concept of personhood. This means that in Africa, the human being cannot be fragmented. The journey to perfection and its attendant actualization is birthed in the community. There is another sense, in which one is described as a person from the metaphysical perspective. Those who hold this view maintain that personhood is not determined by societal morality and the individual's adherence to such societal norms. There are ontological properties possessed by every human being by being human. They do not require the validation of the community to be called a person. It is worth noting that scholars who align more with the normative concept of personhood have always taken centre stage in African worldviews.

We acknowledge that there are inherent flaws in the claims made by the proponents of the normative concepts, as they negate the rights of individuals to some extent and create room for relative moral standards from one community to another. However, our paper has not set out to raise objections to this school of thought. We are more concerned about how the views of either of the schools embolden our claim, that is, that there is a sense in which African moral theory bears a relationship with the concept of the integral.

It is noteworthy that when we speak about community relations in Africa, we do not intend to claim that any two cultures in sub-Saharan Africa are uniform. Each culture has its peculiarities that separate it from other cultures. Similarly, we intend to use sub-Saharan Africa to search for that common denominator that can serve as a point of unity of cultures. This is made possible because the people of sub-Saharan Africa have a shared history of oppression that is primarily a consequence of two factors: geographical and racial identity. We acknowledge that there is no place on the African continent where everyone reasons and acts the same way.

Scholars recognize that each culture has a uniqueness that makes people's lives worldwide more nuanced. In the African traditional worldview, there is a fundamental harmony in everything that exists. This harmony cuts across different disciplines. That is why a medical finding contradicting a theological conclusion could be rejected as absurd. In Western thought, God can be excluded from science without any implications for science and religion. Suppose both religion and science from the African perspective are at the service of humanity. In that case, a bifurcation of both into two different realities raises questions about the relational framework of the African people. An attempt to isolate any reality paralyzes the whole system. In the African traditional worldview, there is a conflation of God and science.

The essence of the above discourse is to highlight the relationship espoused by the Bantu of Rwanda. Alexis Kagame (Jahn 1961, p. 100) conceptualized four categories in African philosophy. They are *muntu* (human beings), *kintu* (things), *hantu* (place and time) and *kuntu* (modality). Nothing can be conceived outside these four categories. However, it should be noted that *muntu* and human being are not co-terminus, since *muntu* includes the living and the dead. It is a force imbued with intelligence and has control over the world. Aïda C. Terblanché-Greeff (2019, pp. 98–99) speaks to this influence of the world of the living dead in human affairs by acknowledging that ancestors are involved in the development of the community. Since the living dead once lived in the community and preserved the environment, it is incumbent on the living to honour the ancestors by ensuring the preservation of nature. On this note, one could also see that reverence is being given, or libation is being poured on a tree, to acknowledge the presence of the ancestors who once took care of things in the natural environment. Kagame opined that *Ntu* is the uniting principle for all the categories in African philosophy. Creation flows from that point, and there can be no contradictions. Kagame (Jahn 1961, pp. 100–2) chose to refer to *Ntu* as determinative because it can determine and, if excluded, destroys meaning. What is striking in Kagame's four categories is that there are four different kinds of realities in Africa that share something in common. This is evident in the concept of *Ntu*. All the categories in African philosophy are *Ntu*. *Kintu* comprises things that exist outside human beings.

Everything in nature outside humans belongs to this category of *kintu*. However, *kintu* needs *muntu* to animate its force, as it is powerless without humans. There are ideas in Kagame's work that we find highly problematic and could negatively impact the environment. *Muntu* is seen from the perspective that it is dominant over *kintu*. If taken in its literal perspective, it then validates the activities of neoliberalists who would want to put profit over safety in business. However, we take from Kagame's presentation the essence of a relationship unified in the determinative *Ntu*. As a unifier, *ntu* is, therefore, that connecting element to *muntu* (humans), *kintu* (the green environment and animals are part of this group) and *hantu* (the place where every natural reality is located).

There is even a sense in which both nonhuman living things and non-living things are classified under kintu in the categories. This possible classification shows that we can speak of non-living things as possessing force, no matter how small the measure is. This then amplifies Nadia Breda's (2022, pp. 163–76) observation of what humans classify as non-living things. Even the aspect of nature deemed non-living is, therefore, questionable. In the first place, the properties of non-living things primarily exist in human consciousness. Since humans classify, humans are also part of those being classified. So, placing themselves at the top of those classified is natural. However, Breda has observed that the so-called non-living things display some attributes of living things. For example, some non-living things adapt to environmental changes like living things. This adaptation is evident in the animistic perspective of relationships among different organisms. Therefore, Nadia concludes that the so-called living and non-living things are co-evolving, with no one dominating the other. In addition to the five cultures that Kagame examined, we choose to add insights from the work of Chimakonam and Ogbonnaya (2021, pp. 214–15), which is inspired by the study of some African cultures. We chose this work because it is well articulated and relies on some prominent African cultures. One dominant feature in studying these African cultures is that relationality is central in all of them; no part of reality is complete in itself.

Munamato Chemhuru (2019, p. 30) thinks that this human-centred ethic, examined in African culture, extends to the environment. This is because the natural environment is where humans live and fulfill the purpose of their existence. However, Chemhuru noted that within the context of the hierarchy of beings in Africa, all other material living things outside the human species are lower than humans. The hierarchy of forces has ecological implications on how nature is viewed and treated. Living things outside humans possess vital forces that make them fulfill some purpose for their existence. They "have their own vital force such that they complement the teleological dimension of existence". We observe from the hierarchy of forces that Chemhuru aligns his thought with that of Alexis Kagame. Chemhuru further buttressed the metaphysical nature of the African life world by emphasizing the bio-centric feature of nature, by which they possess moral worth simply because they have life and are not evaluated based on their adherence to the fulfilment of particular ends.

Leonard Chuwa (2014, p. 38) explains the concept of community relations through Ubuntu. One apparent uniqueness of Ubuntu is that it is both a moral and social imperative. Being a moral imperative, it always seeks to prioritize everyone in the community, and as a social imperative, it allows every individual in the community to come to the full potential of their existence. There is a fusion of the individual and the community without each losing its identity. The reason for this fusion is to ensure that every activity carried out is done with the idea of the community in mind. As such, in order of priority, the community should come before the individual in the scheme of things. This prioritization, in turn, necessarily dovetails into the ethics of care to the point that everything in nature is interwoven, and there is an obligation to preserve and maintain the sacredness of each aspect of nature. Strictly speaking, it is difficult to point to a direct reference to the relationship between humans and the ecosystem in the African ontological framework. Nevertheless, there is always a provision for inference that serves as normative evaluations for African ontology. On this note, such inference can be extracted from the communalistic principles that are woven through different African ideologies.

5. The Integral in Relation to African Ethics

We begin by stating that a primary relationship runs through the integral and African ethics. It stems from the fact that coming from the global south, Pope Francis would have been inspired by the plight of the people of Argentina. When Pope Francis was archbishop of Buenos Aires, the city experienced a new rate and kind of poverty. Beyond the fact that there were people already living below the poverty line, there was a new group of middle class who degenerated to the poverty line. Not just the Argentine city but also its neighbourhood, and other Latin American countries, faced a high level of poverty, with

a distinct gap between the rich and the poor. At the beginning of his papacy, he was already focused on options for the poor through his speeches. He places more emphasis on pastoral care over doctrinal issues, as there is no gain in intellectual discourse when the well-being of the faithful is threatened by war, starvation and poor economic choices. There is a similar and shared history of oppression with the people of sub-Saharan Africa. In January 2024, 57.4% of the Argentine population was considered poor (Calatrava 2024). Around 429 million people in Africa are estimated to live in extreme poverty in 2024 (Galal 2024). It is therefore evident that Pope Francis wrote from a position of pain and oppression. There is, therefore, more clarity for the advancement of workable frameworks that would impact the lives of people in particular regions without at the same time neglecting the dangers inherent in societies that promote oppressive institutions, since the destruction of a part will lead to the destruction of the whole.

Community, or relationship, is one relevant thread that runs through Pope Francis' idea. He believes that all creation is related and that none should be prioritized above others. In the same vein, every human being and every nation have equal worth and should not be racialized or depersonalized. In a meeting at Leon Condou Sports Centre in Paraguay, Pope Francis criticized the reintroduction of the worship of the ancient golden calf in the form of an idolatrous and inhuman acquisition of wealth, and an economy that lacks humanity. Money should not be an end in itself but should be instrumental in the service of human beings. This orientation is also at the very heart of Ujamaa. Ujamaa is preferred as an ideology in African socio-political systems because of its claim to reduced exploitation. Nyerere (1968, pp. 28–29) opined that the people primarily bring about the development of a country. Money is only a result of that development. His focus on people is to dismiss the prioritization of material things over humans, who are the creators of those objects.

Pope Francis rejects the bifurcation of reality into human and nonhuman life. The problem with such a bifurcation by a neoliberal system is that it tends to misuse reality in a way that is problematic for human life. There is no division of the world into two realities; there is only one reality, and that reality is the world in which we live. No reality should be objectified to the point of losing its essential value, and all should work towards the well-being of the other. Maintaining this essential value is what the common good hopes to achieve in promoting a community atmosphere. Therefore, the common good is an action taken with the community's vision as beneficiaries (Porras 2016, p. 140). Every action taken in relation to the integral must carry that vision of the common good. Again, the common good is related not only to the benefits of our actions on humans but also to plants, animals, and everything else in the ecosystem. We have explained how this view is found in the determinative; *Ntu*. We understand the sense in which Pope Francis acknowledges that reality is one. At the same time, reality is not a single unit for the Africans but a plurality of units. Each unit functions to guarantee a greater unity. This has also been captured in the concept of *nmeko* that Chimakonam and Ogbonnaya introduced. The distinction of each unit should be captured so that no one should hide under the cover of a single reality to foist some hegemony on the rest of the world.

Sedmak (2022, p. 156) distinguishes this common good in the *Laudato Si'* from a utilitarian end. While the latter thinks of the greatest happiness for the greatest number, the former is concerned with leaving the ninety-nine and going after that one that is lost. It means it is the greatest good, not for some or the majority but for everyone. It goes after the vulnerable to ensure that they also become beneficiaries of the goods denied to them. At the same time, they need a voice on their behalf, because they are already voiceless on account of their vulnerability. In this context, the integral is different from African ethics. Although both the integral and African ethics prioritize the community, what is not common in African moral theory is a kind that would choose to leave the majority to go after the one person who strays. Everyone is taken into cognizance when observing norms. At the same time, it is noteworthy that consensus is upheld in the final analysis. In the context of consensus, it is different from Western liberalism. Consensus does not count

the votes of the majority and neglects the minority. It struggles to convince the minority to align with the decision of the majority, without recourse to any grudge on the part of the minority. Even though IHD intends for every human being to enjoy the benefits of other aspects of nature, it is still worrisome, as we doubt the acceptance of such principles by the powerful, since it puts their wealth at risk for the benefit of all. This lack of goodwill by some neoliberalists will be a setback to the success of integral ecology, since the IHD's success is hinged on the proper care of the other aspects of nature.

Laudato Si', as a document that has a global flavour, is also a decolonial project. It is so-called not because of its critique of neoliberalism but because of its provision of an alternative ideology for the development of the world. It is different from conventional political documents that seem to champion the same goal, but at the same time, when nations meet on the international scene to discuss issues of global concerns, every country comes with the projection of their interests in mind. *Laudato Si'* sees the entire human race as members of one nation, exemplified in the universal siblinghood of the humans. It also acknowledges a common humanity in the context of the plights of people from the global southern regions, where most poor people live. In this direction, the integral is seen also from the point of view of ecological citizenship instead of environmental citizenship, which focuses on the managerial aspect that deals with contractual obligations (Dalton 2020, pp. 238–39). Within the context of environmental citizenship, institutions and nations form an agreement to obey specific laws for a more sustainable environment. Everyone who has committed to sign such an agreement is obligated to keep to such agreements. Since the consequences of not adhering to such a contract may not be practically enforceable among strong nations, ecological citizenship comes with a more sentimental value with some moral obligations. Here, a nonreciprocal commitment endears an individual or a group to think of the environment in terms of its inherent value. It has to do with having a sense of compassion and duty of care towards others, even in the absence of laws. Even in the presence of laws, society will be partially broken unless people see the duty of care as a moral duty borne out of personal and communal conviction. "Only by cultivating sound virtues will people be able to make a selfless ecological commitment. . .There is a nobility in the duty to care for creation through little daily actions" (LS 211). Ecological citizenship can be achieved only through solidarity, responsibility and compassionate care (LS 210).

Science bears some communal character, to the extent that the experiments of an individual do not validate scientific invention and progress, since they must go through a community of specialists at all levels to ensure they truly conform to standards that can be universalizable with every region of the globe in mind. An eco-African citizenship can stand in the gap where modernism and scientism are projected. We prefer to refer to an eco-African proposal because of the neoliberal tendencies that emanate from parts of the global northern regions of the world. Although Africa has adopted the sort of neoliberalism that promotes some level of uncontrolled capitalism, the traditional African system encouraged high-level socialism. We do not mean that there was no capitalism in that society, but uncontrollable capitalism on a large scale, as it is in the West, was largely absent. An eco-African system proposes the involvement of a refined aspect of traditional African socialism, which prioritizes human beings at the expense of profits that accrue to just a few individuals. Eco-African citizenship will always remind everyone of that communal character that comes with some sense of moral obligation. The universalizability of the eco-African proposal is not tantamount to absolutism. It also means that if it is going to be applied in a new environment, then a review of methods to arrive at solutions will be necessary to capture the new society's peculiarities.

6. Conclusions

This work has explained the integral within the context used in *Laudato Si'*. We proceeded to give an account of reality in the cultural context of the African people, drawing attention to what unites the African people. Integral ecology and African ethics have similarities in the integrality of reality, to the point that they both renounced the

bifurcation of reality, although in different directions. Having an ecological framework with a global appeal is what the integral has achieved. African ethics provides an African flavour. However, integral ecology and African ethics can synchronize for practical solutions that would meet the needs of those who are victims of environmental injustice without at the same time neglecting the desire for equity in all reality. With this, it also means that the search for ecological justice must also not isolate those who are economically stable strictly to the advantage of those considered poor. Creating such a balance is a task which has to be pursued, because the lack of such balance will become an enthronement of another bifurcation, which both African ethics and *Laudato Si'* abhor.

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