

ROOTING THE CHURCH IN THE AFRICAN SOIL & THE BETHANY LAND INSTITUTE

A Theological Experiment

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The goal of African theology and Christianity must be to transform Africa rather than just explain it; to change it positively rather than just study it; to create history rather than just to interpret it - Kā Mana

We have not yet managed to adopt a circular model of production capable of preserving resources for present and future generations, while limiting as much as possible the use of non-renewable resources, moderating their consumption, maximizing their efficient use, reusing and recycling them - Pope Francis.

Abstract: We are living within an ecological crisis, whose adverse effects disproportionately impact the poor around the world, especially millions in Africa. However, it is these poor communities who might also be the ones to offer fresh visions and alternative modes of living and care for mother earth. And since at the basis of our ecological crisis is a theological problem, theology needs to assume the rediscovery of the human vocation to ‘till and care for the earth’ as a crucial, urgent, practical theological task. Whereas it is not clear how embracing this vocation might look like and what forms it might take in America, in poor communities like Africa, in Africa it means that the church’s proclamation and witness of mission Dei can take on fresh and exciting experiments connected to land. The Bethany Land Institute is such an experiment.

In the recent encyclical letter, *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis draws attention to the immensity and urgency of the ecological crisis. Drawing on the best scientific research available, Francis reviews several aspects of the ecological crisis: the irrational belief in progress, modern modes of production and consumerism, a throw away culture, among others, which have contributed to the ecological crisis. The world, “our sister” Francis notes is “crying” under the weight of various burdens: global pollution, water poverty, loss of biodiversity, global inequality and overall the decline in quality of human life (L.S. #15ff) Francis is not the only one to make this observation. A number of others before him – Bill McKibben, Norman Wurzba, Fred Banson, Wendell

Berry, Wes Jackson¹ for example - have been pointing to the cry of the earth, drawing our attention to the unsustainable patterns of production and consumerism, and like Francis noting the adverse effect of the ecological crisis especially on the poor around the world. What perhaps is often not fully attended to, and this is where Francis' *Laudato Si*, significantly advances the discussion are the spiritual and theological roots of the ecological crisis. For even as Francis highlights the complex economic, social, cultural and political factors that contribute to the ecological crisis, at the basis of these factors, he notes, lies a "wound" which Francis also calls a "sin" which has to do with our inability to see and acknowledge our deep connection with the land: "We have forgotten that we ourselves are dust of the earth (Gen 2:7), our very bodies are made of her elements, we breathe her air and we receive life and refreshment from her waters." (LS #2).

In this essay, I would like to advance this conclusion by Pope Francis by making explicit the connection between our inability to see and acknowledge our deep connection with the land and the attempt to escape from our vocation to "till the land and take care of it." (Gen 2:15).

Beginning with the story of my village, I will trace the attempt to escape from the vocation to till and take care of the land to the illusory promises of modernization and civilization in Africa. The result of this effort has been a vision of progress and an economic system which not only excludes the majority of Africans, but has contributed to the emptying out of villages, the destruction of the natural resources, the deepening of the food crisis, and overall to the entrenchment of poverty especially in rural Africa. The goal of my analysis is not simply to lament the fact that dominant missiological models have not questioned or offered an alternative to this myth of progress, but to highlight the unique pastoral and theological opportunity that the ecological crisis presents to the church. The ecological crisis is, in other words, a Kairos moment for the church in general, the church in Africa in particular. And as the South African theologians noted in their famous 1985 Kairos document, a Kairos is a time of judgement, but also a time of rare opportunity.² Accordingly, the "call to action" that Francis issues in *Laudato si*, requires

¹ See e.g. McKibben, *Deep Economics, the Wealth of Communities and the Durable Future* (Time books, New York 2008) Wendell Berry, *The Art of the Commonplace* (Counterpoint, Washington DC 2012); Fred Bahnson & Norman Wirzba, *Making Peace with the Land* (IVP Books, 2012) Wes Jackson, *Consulting the Genius of the Place. An Ecological Approach for a new Agriculture* (Counterpoint, Washington DC, 2010).

² Thus the South African theologians wrote in relation to apartheid: "The time has come... It is the KAIROS or moment of truth not only for apartheid but also for the Church.... We as a group of theologians have been trying to

innovative practical and theological experiments which reflect man's deep connection with the land and form attitudes and practical skills necessary to live out the vocation to 'till the land and take care of it' in Africa. I will describe the Bethany Land Institute as one such experiment.

1. **What is going On? Two images of Malube :**

The village of Malube is 16 miles to the West of Kampala, off the Kampala – Fort Portal highway. When I was growing up in the 1960s our lives and daily routines were so much shaped by and around the 3 acre plot of land that my parents bought when they migrated from Rwanda in the late 1940s. That is where me and my six siblings were born and grew up. My father would wake us up at 5 am in the morning; send us to the garden, where we grew coffee, beans, maize, bananas and other food crops. At around 7 am, our morning work in the garden over, we would trek down into the forest to draw water from a spring. We would then wash up quickly and run two miles to school in order to be there before the opening bell at 8 am. When school got out at 4 pm, we ran home, ate quickly before joining our parents in the garden. Ours was a small piece of land, but it produced enough food to feed our family, and occasionally provide a surplus, which we would sell, together with the coffee, to earn money to pay for our school fees and buy other essential commodities in the home. To be sure, there was nothing romantic about growing up in Malube. Life was tough. But if ours was a simple and "primitive" life-style, it was marked by a deep sense of belonging: to family, community, land (that supplied our food) and forest (where we collected firewood, drew water and on whose outskirts we played).

That was then. Now, when I visit my mother who still lives in the same village, I cannot but notice that a number of things have changed about the village. There are more people living in it; that the forest that surrounded it has all been cut down for firewood and to make room for cultivation; that that the spring has dried up and around where it used to run young men are burning bricks; There is therefore acute "water poverty" in the village.³A number of village plots

understand the theological significance of this moment in our history. It is serious, very serious. For very many Christians in South Africa this is the KAIROS, the moment of grace and opportunity, the favorable time in which God issues a challenge to decisive action. It is a dangerous time because, if this opportunity is missed, and allowed to pass by, the loss for the Church, for the Gospel and for all the people of South Africa will be immeasurable." See *The South Africa Kairos Document 1985* <https://kairossouthernafrica.wordpress.com/2011/05/08/the-south-africa-kairos-document-1985/>

³ Ten years ago, through a non-profit organization, Share the Blessings (<http://www.share-the-blessings.org/>) I helped to raise funds for a borehole for the village.

as well as what used to be a virgin forest has been planted with eucalyptus and pine trees – monoculture forests that while good for revenue, are an ecological hazard.⁴ On the whole therefore the land looks dry and banana trees that dot the village as well as the other crops all look miserable. It is not surprising that there is not much food that is produced on the land. Where in the past we had to carry food for relatives living in the city, now whenever I visit home, I have to buy food and groceries in the city to bring home to the village.

Malube is not unique but in many ways it is a microcosm of what is happening in many parts of Africa where a combination of factors: prolonged civil wars, poor or non-existing food policies, mass deforestation, lack of energy policy, plus a growing population⁵ have all contributed to bring Africa to looming food, water and ecological crisis. The effects of this crisis are increasingly becoming obvious in growing cases of starvation and food insecurity, land and water disputes, and overall more conflicts and civil wars.⁶

But even while not denying the complex political, economic, cultural and policy factors contributing to this ecological crisis, both at the local and global level, the obvious neglect and exploitation of the land reflects an underlying theological problem. This is the “wound” that pope Francis refers to and which has to do with our failure to appreciate our deep connection, in fact, intimacy with the land and our desperate attempt to escape from our human vocation to ‘till the land and care for it.’ This conclusion is even more surprising in Africa where from an African traditional point of view the African sense of “belonging” and thus sense of who one is is always mediated through an intimate connection with the land. This is to say from a traditional point of view, the African is always “grounded” – a son and daughter of the soil – thus the saying: “you can take an African out of the village, but cannot take the village out of him.”

⁴ See e.g. “The Darker Side of Green Plantation Forestry and Carbon Violence in Uganda “ – a report by the Oakland Institute http://www.oaklandinstitute.org/sites/oaklandinstitute.org/files/Report_DarkerSideofGreen_hirez.pdf

⁵ In 1969, Uganda’s population 9.5million; in 2002, it was 24.5million, in 2011, 34million and by 2014 it was 37.5 million. According to the New Vision Jan 23, 2013, with an average pop growth rate of 3.1% the population is expected to increase fivefold by 2100, pushing Uganda to the top 10 most populated nations in the world, according to the latest world population prospects by the United Nations Social and Economic Affairs Division in New York. The report also points out that the fertility rate of Ugandan women is at 5.9 children per woman and notes that Uganda has the world’s second youngest population after Niger, with the current median age registering at 15.8: <http://www.newvision.co.ug/news/644270-uganda-population-at-record-37-million.html> (Feb 15, 2014)

⁶ See e.g. Cullen S. Hendrix & Sarah M Glaser, “Trends and triggers: Climate, climate change and civil conflict in Sub-Saharan Africa,” *Political Geography* 26/6 (2007): 695-71; see also Muhamed Suliman, *Ecology, Politics and Violent Conflict* (Zed Books, 1999)

Unfortunately, this traditional sense of belonging to the land, and with it the love and care for it has been undermined through a modern vision of “progress” and pressure for “modernization.” The latter not only involves a disdain for “manual” labor, it has succeeded in producing masses of uprooted Africans who have lost any sense of what it means to love the land, till it and take care of it.

2. **Running away from the Land. On the Civilizing and Evangelizing Mission of Africa.**

Time and space does not allow for full discussion of Africa’s modernity, and how the vision of “progress” and “civilization” that drives it has had disastrous effect on the African’s view and relation to the land. Hopefully a brief sketch will convey the picture. Riding the cocktails of the Industrial Revolution and the Enlightenment in Europe, the colonization of Africa had as one of its stated objectives, the transformation of ‘primitive’ African societies into ‘developed’ nation – states after the model of Europe. The African ‘village’ in particular, the deep attachment of the natives to their land in particular, represented all that was primitive and evil in Africa (customs, animism, superstition), which had to be left behind if African communities and individuals were to be brought into the sunny future of civilized modernity. Nowhere was this attempt to free Africans from backwardness that the attachment to the land represented than in the colonial Education whose goal was to transform one into a learnt and civilized individual. It is sad to say but the underlying philosophy and major building blocks of this education system have unfortunately remained in place in Independent Africa. A simple but bizarre case comes to mind. By the time we graduated from high school, we had mastered the parts and mechanics of the four stroke engine, even though we could count the number of times we had travelled by a car. But I do not remember a single lesson about goats, millet, bananas and beans on which we lived! The effect of this education system has been to produce individuals who are alienated from the land (its care, tilling and love), but a vision of progress that excludes the majority of Africans. This is what is partly to explain the “disproportionate and unruly growth” of slums in Africa. The residences of these slums are often young, semi-educated, half-starving Africans, totally

alienated from their village environments, loitering the cities looking for ‘modern’ means of employment, which are not available.⁷

The unfortunate part of the story is that the civilizing mission of colonial education and evangelizing mission of the church reinforced each other in a number of ways. The enlightenment dualism between matter – mind found its theological nemesis in the body – soul dualism, where the soul was viewed as the spiritual center and the focus of the church’s mission (saving soul). Thus, mission efforts encouraged and preached their own version of “evacuation”. While the education was met to free us from primitive ways of thinking, which included e.g. belief in the sacredness of land, the evangelizing mission was meant to free us from interest in the material world to focus on the other worldly existence, whose ultimate goal was the eternal life of the soul in heaven. The attachment to the land- in as much it evoked practices like animism, witchcraft, ancestral veneration remained a constant point of attack in the church’s preaching.

Those of us training for church ministry received a double portion of the determined efforts to detach from anything associated with land, including the patterns of growing food. At the seminary, the churches and religious institution always employed people to cultivate the land and grow food, but not the seminarians. I do remember an incident however, when in the 1980s some professors, who had trained in the U.S, attempted to change this. We regarded these professors, including our then rector, as dangerous Marxists or communists. They introduced a communal day of work, on which we the seminarians would work on the farm and also prepare our food. We resisted the policy and organized a sit down strike and decided to boycott not only the work

⁷ Mike Davis (*Planet of Slums*, Verso Publications, New York, 2007) offers one of the most accessible but penetrating studies in the scale and velocity of third world urbanization, a factor that has contributed to the fact that for the first time in the world’s history, the urban population of the world outnumbers its rural population. The remarkable aspect of this trend is that especially in Africa, slums are growing at twice the speed of the continent’s exploding cities. Writing in 2007 he had projected that by 215 black Africa will have 332 million slum dwellers, a number that will continue to double every fifteen years (19). Thus, “instead of cities soaring toward heaven, much of the 21st century urban world squats in squalor, surrounded by pollution, excrement and decay.” (19) While the factors behind the *slumization* (my terminology) of Africa are many, Davis points to the economic dreams and policies of late capitalism: “as a result of urban growth in the context of structural adjustment, currency devaluation, and state retrenchment has been an inevitable recipe for the mass production of slums.” (17). The irony is that while many rural poor move to the cities in order to ‘escape’ poverty, “overurbanization is driven by the reproduction of poverty, not by the supply of jobs.” (16). Davis’s description of the life in the slums is at once chilling and true, describing the slum dwellers as “surplus humanity” (201), living within what can only be described as “marginality within marginality,” as a “zone of exile” and a “semi-death” – (201)

on the farm but classes for a week. Our logic was sound, so at least we thought. We were not only college/university students, we had come to study philosophy and theology; to grasp the eternal mysteries of being and salvation; to attune our minds to the great thinkers - Hegel, Descartes, and Hume, whose philosophy we tried to master, even though we barely understood) and our souls to inner spiritual disciplines so as build up our own 'interior castles' after masters like Meister Eckhart and Theresa of Avila. And here was a 'misguided' faculty wanting us to go work in the fields! Come on! That was way below us. We had already attained a certain level of civilization that gave us the privilege not to do manual labor. That was the work of people who had not gone to school, the work of peasants, like my parents. We were university students.

I tell the story because it nicely captures the unfortunate existential and theological challenge related to land in Africa. The issue is not simply one of seeing the connection that exists between the education system, the idea of "progress", the emptying out of villages, the neglect for the land, the rapid deforestation, exploitation of natural resources, mass poverty and unemployment in Africa. Everything, as pope Francis reminds us in *Laudato Si*, is connected (LS # 10, 46, 48, 56, 91, 117 et passim). The issue is to see how the church in Africa, by remaining beholden to a modern vision of "progress" has missed a great opportunity to affirm out intimacy with God which is related to our intimacy with the land. This is to say, that whereas it has often cited the mandate to "fill the earth and subdue it" of Genesis 1:27, it has very rarely drawn attention to the story of Genesis 2, which not only establishes both God's and man's intimacy with the "soil" but highlights man's vocation to "till the land and take care of it." (Gen 2: 15). A closer look at that story of "in the beginning" offers a good starting point for a regrounding the church's mission in African soil.

3. **A Love affair with Soil: God, Human Beings & Creation:**

Given the attempt outlined above to deny our intimate connection with land it is perhaps not surprising that the story of Genesis Chapter Two has not exercised much influence in shaping the theological imagination of the church in Africa. Yet, it is such a beautiful story that underscores both God's relationship with the land, man's identity as made from the earth, and the vocation in

relation to the land. A reading of Gen 2:4-15 reveals a number of key observations. Five stand out

a. God loves the soil:

In Genesis 2, we see God working with the soil: He fashions everything (creates) out of the soil – he molded; like a porter (image the prophets especially Ezekiel plays with a lot): man out of the soil (2.7); he planted a garden (2.80). As Norman Wurzba notes God not only loves the soil, this is his first love (before God’s love for man is God’s love for the earth!⁸ Thus the image of God that emerges from this story: God knee on the ground, hands in the soil; God’s soiled hands.

b. God the Farmer:

Gen 2: 8-9 states: “Now the Lord God had *planted* a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. 9 The Lord God *made* all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. Eden. God’s work as a farmer produces two effects: beauty and abundance: The Lord God made all kinds of trees and fruits that “pleasing” to the eye. First, in working the soil, in fashioning things out of the ground; in being soiled, God’s finds delight: thus the Garden is Eden, which simply means delightful, “pleasing to the eye”. Secondly, the verse says “all sorts of trees and fruits “good for food.” God is depicted as a master farmer. The image of God the farmer and the bounty of his farming activity is well captured in Psalm 65: without doubt one of my favorite psalms:

*You care for the land and water it;
you enrich it abundantly.
The streams of God are filled with water
to provide the people with grain,
for so you have ordained it.
You drench its furrows and level its ridges;
you soften it with showers and bless its crops.
You crown the year with your bounty,
and your carts overflow with abundance.
The grasslands of the wilderness overflow;
the hills are clothed with gladness.
The meadows are covered with flocks*

⁸ Wurzba & Bahnsen, *Making Peace with the Land*, 16

*and the valleys are mantled with grain;
they shout for joy; they break into song.*

c. Man (finally we come to man) fashioned out of the soil:

God fashioned man (Adam) out of soil (adamah): (Gen 2:7): The Hebrew play on words: the intimate (organic) connection between man (adam) and the soil (adamah).

d. Man's vocation is to "till and take care of the land.

"The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to till and take care of it (Gen 2:15). The American Standard Version translates 'to till it' with to 'cultivate,' which has the same connotation as 'nurture' (when you cultivate something, you grow, you nurture; but nurture also has a sense of 'feeding'). Here lies the crucial image of the earth as mother. Given the play on words (*adam, adamah*) man's relationship to the land is one of 'mothering' So we can say that man's vocation is to 'mother the earth and take care of it. And he is to do so just in the same way that God does. This is the equivalent of what Gen 1 refers to as being created "In God's own image." (Gen 1:27). What this means is that when we come to love the earth, to live in the garden we share God's feeding, healing, reconciling and sustaining ways with the world.⁹ But also that when we mother the earth – in the same way that God does – the earth truly becomes "mother" earth. A mutual mothering, one might say symbiotic love exists between 'adam' and 'adamah', or as pope Francis notes, "This implies a relationship of mutual responsibility between human beings and nature." (LS #67). We must therefore, "forcefully reject the notion that our being created in God's image and given dominion over the earth justifies absolute domination of other creatures." (LS #67).

e. Creaturely existence and limits

What is underscored in the story of Gen 2, is that "human life is grounded in three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: with God, with our neighbor and with the earth itself." (LS

⁹ *ibid.*; 18

#66). These relationships of mutuality are what define our status as “creatures” but also “our creaturely limitations.” When man seeks to deny or overcome man’s status and limits as a creature made from the soil - (a story that is anticipated in Chapter 3 of Genesis by man’s desire to “be like God”), the harmonious relationships between human beings with God, with human beings and with nature is disrupted. Accordingly, one can say that the environment crisis of our time is prefigured and anticipated by the story of Genesis 3, where because of man’s sin, the earth is “cursed,” filled with “thistles and thorns” and the tilling of the earth has become an onerous burden for man.

As my brief analysis has shown, a model of development in Africa has brought us to this stage where rapid deforestation, the depletion of natural resources and a vision of progress that excludes the majority of Africans, who are left without access to basic needs, and who constantly wonder about their worth and dignity. For now our focus has been on trying to understand our predicament and how we got into the straits we are in. In this connection, it has been important to understand the “wound” at the basis of our ecological crisis and the unique form it has taken in Africa. Important as this task has been, the question is whether and how the African church can recover something of the beautiful and integral vision of Genesis 2, and whether a vision like this can become a narrative template for a new theological praxis in Africa? The question is if and how the church can play a key role in integrated ecological and economic vision for Africa? The question is the role that theology needs to play within that revolutionary agenda. For as the Congolese theologian Ka Mana rightly notes: “The goal of African theology and Christianity must be to transform Africa rather than just explain it; to change it positively rather than just study it; to create history rather than just to interpret it.”¹⁰

It is this same impetus for conversion of our current patterns of production and consumerism that lies behind Francis’ repeated call to action in LS, and his often repeated mantra: “realities are more important than ideas” (#110, 201). In this connection Francis offers a number very concrete suggestions for the realization of a new ecological culture, which range from everyday actions such as avoiding the use of plastic and paper, reducing water consumption, separating refuse, cooking only what can reasonably be consumed, showing care for other living beings, planting

¹⁰ See Kalemba Mwambazambi, “Kä Mana Champion of the Theology of Reconstruction,” in *African Theology: The Contribution of the Founders*, Vol 3, ed. Benézét Bujo (Paulines, Nairobi 2012), p. 154

trees... (#212) to education, economic, political and social policies for an integrated ecology. However, over and beyond these concrete measures, pope Francis calls for a comprehensive and revolutionary revision of our essential membership in creation, which affects all our spirituality, polices and all our modes of production and consumerism. As he notes

“Ecological culture cannot be reduced to a series of urgent and partial responses to the immediate problems of pollution, environmental decay and the depletion of natural resources. There needs to be a distinctive way of looking at things, a way of thinking, an educational programme, a lifestyle and spirituality which together generate resistance to the assault of the technocratic paradigm ((LS #111)

Francis’ call above points to the need to recover something of the vision of Genesis 2: man’s essential connection with the land and the vocation to till and care for it as the basis of a new economic and social vision for the world. It still remains to be seen how this revolutionary “way of thinking” would look in the West, and what forms of “educational programme” might sustain it today.¹¹ However, in Africa, where the majority of people live in rural communities and villages, the cultivation of a new way of thinking about the land and their vocation to till and care for it becomes an urgent pastoral theological task. The task calls for fresh experiments and education initiatives connected to land, which bring together theology, food production, economics and ecological consciousness. The Bethany Land Institute is such an experiment.

4. The Bethany Land Institute: Rooting Missio Dei in African soil

The vision of the Bethany Land Institute was inspired by a visit to St. Jude’s Farm Busense near Masaka in southern Uganda. When I first visited the farm in the summer of 2007,¹² I was struck by a number of things. First, I did not know that something like this existed: A beautiful,

¹¹ However, the story of the National Catholic Rural Life Conference (NCRLC) offers a good historical case. Their efforts, especially in the 1930’s and 40’s to spearhead a “green revolution” by empowering rural communities, supporting small farms and local businesses, promoting responsible land stewardship, and creating a platform to connect rural farmers and enhance their advocacy provides the kind of ecclesially based ecological effort that is needed. For a good introduction and account of the efforts of the NCRLC during the 30s and 40s, see especially, Christopher Hamlin and John T. McGreevy, *The Greening of America, Catholic Style, 1930-1950. Environment History* 11 (2006):464-499.

¹² For the story of the visit and its implications for world Christianity see my “Mission and the Ephesian Moment of World Christianity: Pilgrimages of Pain and Hope and the Economics of Eating Together,” *Mission Studies* 29 (2012) 183–200.

integrated farm, sitting on 3 and half acres of land, with a variety of crops, animals, a fish pond, bee hives and all kinds of shade and fruit trees. As the instructors took us around the farm, they highlighted over and over again how “everything is connected to everything else”: the crops feed the animals; the animals produce manure to fertilize the land and also produce biogas for cooking. The instructors also stressed how they tried to do everything in a “natural” way. Accordingly, they do not use chemical agents, and they produce their own pesticides from herbs which grow on the farm. The high yields from St. Jude’s farm reminded me of something I had read pointing out that natural methods of farming are far more productive than conventional mechanized agriculture.¹³ The farm offered a completely different (delightful) picture than my native village of Malube.

Secondly, listening to the story of Josephine Kizza and her late husband (the founders) I learnt that they started out only with two piglets. But that over the years the farm has grown into such a flourishing model farm (The president has visited 3 times and called her ‘Muzukusa” (one who awakens) reflects a spirit of determination and hard work, which however has paid off. From the farm Josephine earns over \$3000 a month.

Thirdly, the simple but profound practical theology that underlies everything that points to the land as mother who feeds us: “God has given us everything we need,” Josephine explained. But He has asked us one thing: “Feed the land so that the land can feed you.”

Fourthly, the fact that St Jude’s Farm serves as a “Rural Training Centre for Integrated and Sustainable Agriculture. Under this educational and outreach program it has trained over 250 rural farmers, mostly women from neighboring villages.

My first visit was short but it offered me a glimpse of how each and every African villages can and should look like. St. Jude’s, with its beauty, bounty and variety, evoked my scriptural imagination of the Garden of Eden. That I could see its reality right in the middle of Africa, inspired a vision for a land based initiative that would bring together theology, food production,

¹³ Questioning the “mirage of abundance” of modern industrialized farming, Fred Bahnson notes, “Using conventional agricultural practices, it takes just over an acre of land to feed one person in the United States for a year, and far more energy and topsoil are wasted than are produced in food calories. Using bio intensive methods, you can feed ten people for a whole year on that one acre, and you can build soil fertility while doing it. That same acre, by the way, would feed one cow for a whole year, or it would fill up the gas tank of your car with ethanol exactly twice.” See Wirzba and Bahnson, *Making Peace with the Land*, 97.

economics and ecological awareness. Such an initiative would build on and expand the ecological and economic possibilities of St. Jude's farm, while serving as a catalyst for rural transformation, youth employment and reforestation efforts throughout the country. At the heart of this initiative would have to be an explicit theological narrative, so that the initiative would itself become the argument and evidence of the church as a sign and sacrament of God's new creation in Africa.

I shared my experience at St. Jude's farm and the outline of an emerging vision with two of my priest friends. In 2013, together with these two priest friends, we bought 57 acres of land in rural Luweero, and starting working on setting up a foundation, the Bethany Land Institute, as an education program for a practical theology of land, peace and creation care. The choice of the name "Bethany" was intentional. It was based on an earlier reflection in which I pointed to the biblical village of Bethany (*beit-aniae: house of the poor*) as an image for Africa.¹⁴ But as the biblical Bethany – the home of Jesus' friends (Mary, Martha, Lazarus, Simon the leper...) – was both the place of "resurrection" and of mission, so too the hope is that the Bethany Land institute would be catalyst for a revolutionary ecological and economic resurrection of rural Africa.

Even though plans for the Bethany Land Institute predated pope Francis' *Laudato Si*, its answers Francis call for an "educational program" to form and nurture a fresh "way of thinking," and a "new lifestyle and spirituality" in relation to land in Africa. Inspired by the story of Genesis chapter 2, the Bethany Land Institute seeks to cultivate love for the land and form habits and skills that advance man's vocation to 'till and take care of the land' in Africa. In doing so, it addresses three immediate and major problems of the ecological crisis in Africa: food shortage, deforestation and youth unemployment. It will do so under three major programs:

a. An integrated Farm: (similar to St. Jude's Farm) that will run both an outreach and residential program to train local farmers in methods of sustainable (natural) land care and food production. Upon graduation, interns of the residential program will set up their own model farms in villages, where they will mentor at least two farmers every year, thus becoming catalysts for rural transformation.

¹⁴ See my *Stories from Bethany: On the Faces of the Church in Africa*. Paulines Nairobi, 2012.

b. A natural Forest: to serve as a demonstration and catalyst for a major re-greening effort throughout the country. The vision is that through the forest and the outreach program to have planted one million trees by 2050.

c. A Road side Market where interns will sell the produce from the land, but which will also serve as a rest stop on the highway, and operate a micro credit scheme for rural farmers.

Conclusion:

In Laudato Si pope Francis that “We have not yet managed to adopt a circular model of production capable of preserving resources for present and future generations, while limiting as much as possible the use of non-renewable resources, moderating their consumption, maximizing their efficient use, reusing and recycling them (LS # 22). It is this circular mode of production that the BLI seeks to catalyze in Africa in a way that reconnects the ecological and social questions for as Francis notes: a true ecological approach always becomes a social approach, it must integrate questions of justice ... so as to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor (LS # 49).

More specifically the Bethany Land Institute will seek to reconnect issues of ecology, economics in Africa to the story of God in Genesis 2. For as Peter Mourin: the co-founder of the Catholic Worker once noted the main problem with society is that that “sociology, economics, and politics had all been separated from the Gospel. In the process, society had lost any sense of the ultimate, transcendent purpose of human activity.”¹⁵ The assumption is that reconnecting in a concrete and visible way the love and care for the land with the story of God in Genesis, Bethany Land Institute will contribute towards reinvesting what, under modernity has tended to be looked at as menial and primitive occupations reserved for failures and school drop outs, with a sense of the ultimate. This will not only contribute to a new appreciation of the noble vocation to till and care for the earth in Africa. It will offer millions of Africans (especially the youth) livelihood and a new sense of their worth and dignity even as recreate beauty and abundance in rural Africa.

¹⁵ see Robert Ellsberg, “Introduction” to *Dorothy Day Selected Writings*, (Orbis 2013), xxvi

No doubt, in the face of immense ecological problems, such efforts cannot but appear small and insignificant. But as Dorothy Day used to say “it is little by little that we are saved”. Moreover, it is through such little efforts that we can hope, as Peter Murin and Dorothy Day hoped, to build “a new world within the shell of the old.” (xxvii). Or as pope Francis puts it, even such small efforts, “can restore our sense of self-esteem,” and enables us “to live more fully and to feel that life on earth is worthwhile”(LS #212).