

Seven Convictions of an Emerging Prophetic Theological Ethics in our Time¹
A Call to Action

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1. All Theology, including theological ethics, is a **theology of hope**. Our primary and chief task as theologians is to respond Peter's invitation: "always be prepared to give an account of the hope that is in you," (1 Peter 3:15). Peter writes these words to Christians scattered in remote parts of the Roman Empire, cut off from the mainstream and viewed with suspicion and even open hostility. To these beleaguered Christians Peter invites them to "rejoice" even as they are, for a while, undergoing suffering. The reason for this, Peter reminds them is because they are God's new people, who have been called out of darkness into God's wonderful light and therefore are a "chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people set apart for God's own possession." (1 Peter 2,9). Peter's exhortation speaks directly not only to who we are but to the context and goal of our theological task. It is a reminder of the tone and style of our theological engagement, which must always be characterized by joy "rejoice"), and must proceed "with gentleness and humility" so as to not only inform but also inspire the Christian community.
2. Everything is interconnected, which points to the task of bridge building. Our theological task arises out of a cry – a cry of lament for our natural, social and political ecology. Throughout our time at this Conference we have been examining two urgent issues that define our world today: the ecological crisis and its impact on the environment and marginalized populations on the one hand, and the tragic banality of contemporary political leadership. These challenges are deeply **interconnected**. As Pope Francis reminds us, the social and ecological deteriorate

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together. "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 (L.S. 139). Accordingly, a "true ecological approach *always* becomes a social approach... so as to hear *both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor.*" (L.S. 49). The observation highlights the need to make connections in our theology, to "bring together the different fields of knowledge, including economics, in the service of a more integral and integrating vision. Today an analysis of environmental problems cannot be separated from the analysis of human, family, work-related and urban contexts, nor from how individuals relate to themselves, which leads in turn to how they related to others and to the environment." (141). The need to make bridges between the different social challenges we face today, between the different fields of knowledge, and between the academy and the grassroots, between Christians and non-Christians has been highlighted throughout the conference. We find ourselves at a Kairos moment with many forces seeking to build walls between "us" and "them". But this moment also offers numerous opportunity for bridge building.

3. An underlying spiritual crisis. Attending to the twin cries of the earth and of the poor allows us to see not only the interconnectedness of these cries, but to begin to grasp the underlying **spiritual crisis** of our world. Again, here Pope Francis provides a model and crucial insight. For even as he analyses the ecological crisis and describes its effect, and rightly critic the technocratic paradigm that drives it, he rightly points to the spiritual roots of the crisis. At the root of our ecological and social crisis, Pope Francis notes, lies a spiritual crisis – which he also describes as a "wound" and "sin" – the crisis of belonging: "we have forgotten that we ourselves are dust of the earth; our very bodies are made up of her elements, we breather her air and we receive life and refreshment from her waters." (L.S. #2). It is for this reason that in *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis calls for 'ecological conversion' and for a new ecological citizenship (211), sustained by different ecological virtues (gratitude, service, care, tenderness, peace, humility..) which cultivate "nobility" (211) and "self-esteem" (212) and a new sense of belonging to the earth and human community. One major implication for us as theological ethicists is that in responding to the social, ecological and political crisis of our time requires of us to move beyond policy and ethical recommendations and prescriptions, and

constantly point to the need for “**conversion**” – a conversion of heart and of the imagination, and to the cultivation of attendant spiritual values that sustain human dignity and self-esteem that arises out of a renewed sense of “communion” and interconnectedness between God, the human and the earth community.

4. Prophetic theology as critique and denouncement. In this Jeremiah, the wailing prophet provides both a model and crucial insight. In terms of prophetic critique, Jeremiah’s prophetic denunciation was directed especially to three areas of public life: (i) to political life in general and the institutions of public life, which are built on lies and greed (Jer 9: 3-5). In this connection, Jeremiah has sharp words to the leaders who “have grown powerful and rich, fat and sleek” (5:27-8) on the backs of the poor who are oppressed (Jer 5:28); (ii) Jeremiah’s harshest criticisms are directed at the religious leaders. These are the ones who should know better and expose the unjust and evil social structures and ills. Instead, “the prophets have become wind, and the word is not in them” (Jer 5:13). They prophesy falsely, participate in the same wicked ways, and offer consolations and empty promises of peace, thus “treating the wounds of my people lightly (Jer 6:13-14); (iii) the overall effect of the deteriorating political and religious economy has led to the worst ecological crisis. Jeremiah’s tears are, as it were an installment of Y’s own tears on the destruction of the earth (Jer 4: 23-26). Following Jeremiah’s example requires both **courage** and vigilance so as to be able to point out what is broken not only out there in the political, religious and economic systems, but within the church itself. However, the more we engage this self-critique, the the more we will find ourselves, not unlike Jeremiah, in that “**terrible middle**” between God and our own people, between the church and the church whose limits we point out. Standing and operating within this “terrible middle” we might feel increasingly isolated, betrayed and abandoned.
5. Our prophetic task is not simply one of critique, but also one of announcing and describing a new order; of invitation into a “**new covenant**” – a new future. Jeremiah’s call to the prophetic task involves three sets of words: “See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to *uproot* and *tear down*, to *destroy* and *overthrow*, to *build* and to *plant*” (1:10). What these pairings suggest is that as a prophet Jeremiah is called not only tear down, but also to build and plant, not only

to offer warning for the impending destruction (as in the first twenty-eight chapters), but also hope in the wake of destruction. Thus, the section of Jeremiah that runs from the beginning of chapter 31 to chapter 33, verse 26 is often referred to by scholars as the “book of consolation.” Here Jeremiah’s words to those who survived the destruction he had predicted and those carried off into exile are filled with promises of healing and visions of return. The prophet promises not simply restoration; he speaks of “a new order” when the city will be rebuilt; the once crushed and despised people will be honored; and visions of economic flourishing will fill city and countryside (30: 18-19). For Jeremiah, the restoration will signal a new covenant that God will make with the people (31: 31-33), which will be based on intimate relationship with/knowledge of God (31:34). Our task of giving an account of hope is an invitation for stories that display the simplicity and elegance, the goodness and beauty, the ethics and aesthetics, the ordinary and extraordinary nature of this new covenant in our time. Giving an account of hope invites us to become story-tellers as we seek to display concretely the where, the when and how of a new future of integral ecology, reconciliation, hospitality – in a word, the contours of a new covenant!

6. An invitation into a new kind of knowledge (intimate knowledge - Jeremiah), a new kind of theological ethics. As Wendell Berry notes, “we are talking here not just about a kind of knowledge that involves affection but also about a kind of knowledge that comes from with affection – knowledge that is unavailable to the unaffectionate, and that is unavailable to anyone as what is called information.” (Wendell Berry, “Out of Your Car, Off Your Horse,”). This is not detached knowledge, but knowledge as action and advocacy – the kind of knowledge that is born in and through struggle with and on behalf of the poor and marginalized of history. David Tracy is right: all theology is a form of political theology. For as he and others note, the suffering in the world “drives the Christian not to further theological speculation but to the cross” and to the “memory of suffering and the **struggle** by, for, and with ‘others’ especially the forgotten and marginal ones in history.”² Giving an account of hope as an invitation not into more arm chair (library based) accounts of God, but theological engagement on behalf of and with the “crucified peoples” (Sobrino) of the world.

² Tracy, David. “The Hidden God: The Divine Other of Liberation.” *Cross Currents* (Spring 1996): p. 11, 8.

7. The need for bold action. The challenges we face are immense and broad. The dignity and lives of millions of people are threatened as is the very future of our planet. Our playing small does neither serve us nor the world. These challenges therefore call for a “bold cultural revolution” (Pope Francis). And yet as Wendell Berry suggests, we must learn the discipline of “**think little**” - which according to Berry is a commitment to action in concrete and local ways. For as he rightly notes, properly speaking, global thinking is not possible: “Unless one is willing to be destructive on a very large scale, one cannot do something except locally, in a small place (Berry 1991, 20). Thus for Berry, in order to make sense of the planet, you must make ecological good sense locally. “If you want to keep your local acts from destroying the globe, you must think locally” (Out of Your car and off your Horse” 1991, 4). Thinking and acting “locally” is what “keeps work within the reach of love” (Berry 1991, 24). Think Little is Wanghari Maathai who started working with local women to plant trees to address the challenge of firewood. Her efforts led not only to a civic moment that brought down Moi’s dictatorial regime, her Green Belt Movement has to date planted over 51 million trees. Think Little is the Catholic Youth Network for Environmental Sustainability in Africa (CYNEA), with chapters in eight countries in Africa, providing a platform and networking for young people to address the challenges of environment degradation and climate change. Think Little is Godfrey Nzamujo, a Nigeria born Dominican priest, who established Songhai Center in Porto Novo Benin, which the UN has recently named a “center of excellence” where he trains young people in various aspects of integral ecology, who then in turn become agents for the transformation of their communities. Think Little is Josephine Kizza who together with her husband founded the St. Jude’s farm in Uganda on 3.5 acres of land – now training rural communities in the simple theology of integral ecology: feed the land so that the land can feed you.

Since we are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses, let us therefore “strengthen our feeble arms and buckle our trembling knees” (Heb 12:12) to give an account of hope in our beleaguered world. Responding to Peter’s exhortation to “give an account of hope” is a call not only to tell the stories of the cloud of witnesses that

give us hope in the world, it is an invitation to join them in their struggle and on the bold revolution of hope they are on.