



THOMAS AQUINAS' JUSTICE AS COMMON GOOD: AN ANTIDOTE TO ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS

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This paper explores Thomas Aquinas' Concept of justice as an antidote to the environmental crisis that Pope Francis highlighted in Laudato Si. This paper argues that a Thomistic understanding of justice, as it centers on the idea of the common good, will contribute to solving the environmental crisis that adversely impacts the poor in the community. Thus, this paper aims to contribute to solving the world's environmental crisis. It discusses various environmental crises and Thomas Aquinas' concept of justice as a common good. This research applies Thomas Aquinas' understanding of justice in addressing the environmental crisis.

Keywords: Thomas Aquinas, Pope Francis, Justice, Environmental Crisis, Common Good

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1. INTRODUCTION

In 2015, Pope Francis released his second encyclical letter entitled *Laudato Si*. The encyclical extensively discusses the causes of environmental degradation and crisis and their impacts on the lives of the poor, especially on their livelihoods, since most of the poor are farmers and fishers. Pope Francis draws our attention to our tendency to destroy the environment for the sake of profit, thus proliferating the mentality of consumerism and throwaway culture, which treats the environment as a mere object of commodity, void of concern for the most vulnerable sector of the community.

In this encyclical letter, he highlights the interconnectedness of all things on earth, especially the connection of the environment to human beings. Pope Francis even reechoed St. Francis of Assisi's Canticle of Brother Sun and Sister Moon. The canticle contemplates the presence of God in all created beings on earth and our deep connections with God, humankind, and the environment. Human beings are the primary beneficiaries of God's creation; through it, we benefit from the fruits of the environment. Human beings cannot survive without the sustenance of the environment; the oxygen we inhale, the food we eat on our table, and the clothes we wear are products of the environment.

One of the recurring themes in *Laudato Si* is the preferential option for the poor. Pope Francis (2015) writes: 'The cry of the earth is the cry of the poor' (pa. 49). Thus, in *Laudato Si*, preferential option for the poor is inextricably linked to our environmental response. The never-ending destruction and exploitation of the mountains, forests, rivers, lakes, and seas caused poor communities in rural areas to cry for justice and call on people in authority, including the Church, to respond to their suffering.

The poor are calling to end mining, quarries, illegal logging, and building of industrial and commercial structures in protected areas because they adversely affect their agricultural land, their primary source of income. Therefore, our neglect of the environment manifests our indifference to the suffering and mourning of the poor over the death of their livelihood.

Hence, in *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis calls for a preferential option for the poor that promotes an integral ecology in which our concern for the environment and the poor is substantially united. However, when human activities toward the environment are not regulated, they will continue to threaten the environment and the lives of the poor in the community. Thus, to promote preferential options for the poor, it necessitates that certain principles or virtues should guide humanity in their relationship with the environment. In line with this, this paper explores Thomas Aquinas' concept of justice as an antidote to the environmental crisis to promote Pope Francis' idea of preferential options for the poor in *Laudato Si*. This paper argues that a Thomistic understanding of justice, as it centers on the idea of the common good, will contribute to solving environmental crises, which Pope Francis highlighted in *Laudato Si*. The first part of the paper discusses environmental crises and how they adversely impact the lives of the poor in the community. The second part investigates Thomas Aquinas' concept of justice, highlighting the principle of the common good. The final part of the paper synthesizes Thomas Aquinas' understanding of justice and gives recommendations for addressing environmental crises to alleviate the conditions of the poor. This study employs textual analysis to gather and analyze data relevant to the study. In particular, the writer will use content critical analysis to interpret Pope Francis' *Laudato Si* and Thomas Aquinas' justice in *Summa Theologiae*.





2. ENVIRONMENTAL CRISES AND PREFERENTIAL OPTION FOR THE POOR

On March 13, 2013, white smoke billowed through the chimney over the Sistine Chapel in Rome; it signaled that the Catholic Church has a new pope. A sea of crowds gathered around St. Peter's Square to witness the first appearance of the new Pope after Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI resigned on February 28 of that same year. The crowd cheered as they saw the new Pope appear on the central balcony of St. Peter's Basilica on March 13 in Vatican City. The College of Cardinals elected Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio of Argentina, who chose to be called Pope Francis, inspired by St. Francis of Assisi. Pope Francis' preference for his name signals his vision of the Catholic Church concerning the poor and creation. As we all know, St. Francis of Assisi is known for his radical love for the poor, care for God's creations, simplicity of life, and poverty. At the outset of Pope Francis' election, we can observe the message he wanted to convey to everyone around the world: his preference for the poor and his care for God's creations.

2.1 THE IMPACTS OF ENVIRONMENTAL CRISES ON THE POOR

Two years later, after he was elected Pope, he wrote an encyclical letter entitled *Laudato Si*, On Care for Our Common Home. The encyclical letter is the first encyclical that deals directly with the environment and its relations to human beings. One notable emphasis in *Laudato Si* is the interdependence of human beings and the environment, which also relates preferential options for the poor to our care and protection of the environment. Pope Francis (2015) argues that environmental degradation and deterioration, which are the results of our abuse and exploitation, have destroyed the livelihood of many poor communities around the world.

The decline and destruction of the environment resulted from our tendency to consume things beyond what we need, perpetuating a lifestyle of wasteful consumerism and fueling a mindset that everything is disposable; in *Laudato Si*, he calls it throw-away culture. Human activities that fail to nurture and preserve the environment, such as improper disposal of garbage, illegal logging, quarrying, mining, and the like, have direct repercussions on the community, especially on the most vulnerable members- the poor people. Hence, Pope Francis, in *Laudato Si*, enormously discussed the intimate link or bond between the poor and the environment.

Pope Francis calls our attention to human activities that continue to damage and abuse the environment, eventually contributing to the suffering of the poor in the communities. He uses the approach of integral ecology to connect 'environmental concerns and the poor who are the first and foremost victims of the current paradigm of exploitation of the earth to suggest a new paradigm of caring for our common home' (Martins, 2018, p. 411). The interdependence of the environment and the life of the poor indicates that whatever actions we take on the environment directly impact the lives of the poor, either positively or negatively. Hence, concern for the poor involves examining our relationship with the environment and contributing to protecting and caring for our natural resources.

The problems in the environment that the poor experience in the community are the collective effects of human activities. All of us have contributed to the suffering of the poor through our constant neglect to hear the cry of the earth abused and exploited by its inhabitants. "Climate change, despite its huge potential for harm, is a collective action problem brought about by billions of tiny contributions' (Fragniere, 2016, pp. 798-799). Our irresponsible activities against





the environment exacerbate the poverty of people dependent on natural resources. When we exploit the environment, the poor suffer because they depend on it for their livelihood, since most of them are farmers and fishers.

For Pope Francis, the environment is not just a thing without a strong connection and bond to us; he considers everything in nature part of our extended family. Reflecting on the life of St. Francis of Assisi, who inspired him to take the name Francis when he was elected as Bishop of Rome, Pope Francis (2015) describes him as a man who treats 'every creature [as] a sister united to him by bonds of affection' (p. 11). Pope Francis counts every creature, no matter how small and insignificant, in the eyes of human beings, as part of a family. In a world where everything seems to have fallen apart from each other due to our disposition to compartmentalize and disintegrate things in life, we are once again reminded of our intimate union with one another. Our strong connection and bond with all that exists on earth will inspire us to protect and preserve the environment.

What is unique in Pope Francis' preferential option for the poor is the assertion of the substantial unity between the poor and the environment. Pope Francis' emphasis on the intimate union of all things on earth signals his priorities as the leader of the universal Church: 'merciful solidarity with the poor and the entire created order' (Flores, 2018, p. 467). Our affection and concern for the poor in the community must extend to non-human creatures around us. For Pope Francis, we can never dichotomize our preference for the poor and concern for nature on the other side; our love and concern for the poor are simultaneous with the environment. A person can never claim to have concern for the poor while exploiting the environment for profit. Our neglect of the environment manifests our

indifference and insensitivity to the lives of the poor in the community. Hence, a person who has a preferential option for the poor is also a nature-lover at the same time.

2.2 ENVIRONMENTAL CRISES: A CALL FOR REFLECTION AND ACTION

The interconnectedness of human beings to other creatures around us, as highlighted by Pope Francis in *Laudato Si*, awakens us to reexamine our lifestyles that may cause the deterioration and destruction of the environment. Our obsession with material things and selfish economic interests could ignore our greater responsibility to the community to protect and preserve the environment, to uplift the lives of the poor. Our heedlessness to take responsibility for the environment could manifest our indifference to the well-being of the less fortunate and environmentally dependent people in society. Pope Francis (2015) states, 'These situations have caused sister earth, along with all the abandoned of our world, to cry out, pleading that we take another course' (p. 53). Realizing that our activities impact the poor and the environment, we must adopt lifestyles promoting care and love for the environment and the poor.

'We all have moral obligations to assess our lifestyles that may worsen the environmental crisis we experience in our community's current state' (Darr, 2019, p. 339). It is a moral imperative that each of us must reflect on how we relate to our surroundings and how our daily activities possibly impact the present conditions of our planet. Reflecting on our current relations with the environment involves a personal commitment to uplift the social conditions of the poor by protecting our Mother Earth from degradation and exploitation. We can mitigate environmental crises if we are all committed to stopping our activities contributing to climate





change, such as cutting trees, improper disposal of garbage, illegal logging, and mining.

We indeed have to enjoy the beauty of God's creatures as they are made for human beings, not the other way. However, attached to our right to enjoy it is our innate responsibility to respect and safeguard the environment. It is sad to note that some human beings opt to engage in activities that exploit and abuse the environment, which endangers the livelihood of the poor in society. Pope Francis (2015) laments over our attitude to becoming masters and lords of the earth who are entitled to use and abuse the environment. Pope Francis' preferential option for the poor calls for all people to be constant and firm in safeguarding our natural resources, thereby preserving the rights and lives of the poor. Preferential option for the poor requires us to defend the environment from exploitation and abuse by some members of society.

More than our right to enjoy the environment, our greater responsibility is to safeguard and nurture it for the whole community. God created the world for us and the entire human race to benefit from it, especially the poor. As we reflect on our relationship with the environment, let us remind ourselves that everything is from God and belongs to no one. In short, no one can claim that he/she owns everything on earth. No one owns the environment since it belongs to everyone. 'In reality, we do not possess or own anything. Rather, the whole world, including us, belongs to God, and it is the height of arrogance for human beings to think otherwise' (Beltran, 2020, p. 40). Hence, it is our responsibility to the whole community to protect the environment since the right to own it belongs to the entire community.

Our relationship with the environment is always an invitation to consider the welfare of

the community, especially the poor, and never our individualistic and selfish interest in the environment. We must find ways and means to exist here on earth, but our existence should not threaten the environment and endanger the lives of the poor in the community. 'Each of us has needs to be satisfied to live on this planet; however, it is important to note that growing attention to needs here is not an individualistic approach based on individual goals and interests. Rather, these needs are deeper and consistent with a commitment to the common good of all people and parties involved' (McCarthy, 2016, p. 71). Therefore, in our relationship with Mother Earth, the good of the community always prevails over our self-centered ambitions on natural resources. The environment is meant for everyone to enjoy and benefit from, and never for a single person to manipulate and exploit it for personal gains, devoid of concern for the welfare of the community.

2.3 ENVIRONMENTAL CRISES: A COMMON CONCERN OF ALL

Pope Francis recognizes that the suffering of the poor and the destruction of the environment are interconnected and shared concerns of all people of goodwill. Pope Francis emphasizes the intrinsic connection between the suffering of the poor and the destruction of the environment. He highlights how these issues are not separate or isolated but rather intertwined and mutually reinforcing. For him, 'a true ecological approach always becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment so as to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor' (Francis, 2015, p. 48). In *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis repeatedly emphasizes the interconnectedness and interdependence of the poor and the environment, in which the issues of the poor and the environment are the collective concerns of all people. Hence, Pope





Francis compels us to respond holistically and simultaneously solve the cry of the poor and the earth. Pope Francis (2015) wrote that 'we are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental. Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature' (p. 139). Our response to the problems and crises of the poor and the environment cannot be compartmentalized and cater only to the poor, but not the environment, and vice versa. Pope Francis admonishes us to form an integral approach to poverty alleviation and nurturing the environment. As indicated by Pope Francis in *Laudato Si*, the preferential option for the poor is safeguarding and protecting the environment because the poor are the primary victims of injustices done to our natural resources.

Although the poor are the most affected people in the community due to the environmental crisis, we cannot deny that all of us have suffered the consequences of climate change. The rising sea levels, flooding, extreme weather conditions, typhoons, rising temperatures, landslides, droughts, and depletion of natural resources are felt by all in the community. These phenomena affected both the rich and the poor in the community. Therefore, it is our shared responsibility in collaboration with all members of the community to make the world a better place to live that can sustain the needs of all its inhabitants. Benigno Beltran (2020) writes, 'Caring for Mother Earth is a common responsibility because it is our common home. We all belong to the same biosphere, the web of life' (p. 42). The collaboration and inclusion of all inhabitants of the earth are vital to counter the degradation and deterioration of the earth. The environmental crisis we face is large enough for

a single person or institution to solve, but when we unite and commit ourselves, we can make a significant impact in safeguarding and nurturing Mother Earth. Caring for and safeguarding the environment is the concern and responsibility of all people since we live on the same planet: the earth is our common home. Hence, our common mission is to safeguard and nurture our home.

Undeniably, the harm and damage we do to the environment aggravate the suffering and poverty of our farmers and fishermen in the villages where people rely heavily on natural resources for their food and livelihood. Many members of the community in rural areas lost their source of income due to the destruction of the environment, such as converting agricultural land into commercial places and subdivisions, building dams in their ancestral lands, mining, and quarrying. Pope Francis (2015) wrote that 'the human environment and the natural environment deteriorate together; we cannot adequately combat environmental degradation unless we attend to causes related to human and social degradation' (p. 48). Thus, combating poverty to alleviate the suffering of the poor means working to improve the conditions of the environment, which feeds and provides for the needs of the poor in the community. Instead of cutting down trees, quarrying our mountains, throwing garbage into the rivers, and resorting to illegal fishing, we should plant more trees, recycle, and adopt a more environmentally-friendly lifestyle. In that way, we are not just nurturing and protecting the environment from destruction and abuse; we are also ameliorating the misery of the poor in the community.





3. EXPOSITION OF THOMAS AQUINAS' CONCEPT OF JUSTICE

Thomas Aquinas' idea of justice includes discussing general, commutative, and distributive justice. Among the recurring themes in Thomas' discussion of justice is the implication of justice to our relationship with others and the community. For Thomas Aquinas, justice regulates our relationship with the other and the community such that this relationship must aim at realizing the common good.

3.1 JUSTICE IS ABOUT THE OTHER, NOT THE SELF

Upon reading Thomas Aquinas' definition of justice, one can directly notice that justice is meant to manifest for the other members of society. Justice directs oneself to do actions that are proper and noble for others. In his article entitled *Justice as Responsible Human Relations*, Joel Sagut (2008) writes that 'justice always has a social value' (p. 70). This means that in doing justice, the central figure who benefits from the actions is the other rather than the self. Justice directs oneself to render what is due to the other.

For Thomas Aquinas, 'justice is a habit whereby a man renders to each one his due by constant and perpetual will' (ST II-II, q. 58, art.1). Justice regulates and directs our relationship with others in the community. It means that in doing justice, we prioritize the welfare and good of others. The other becomes the object of justice rather than the self. Justice is attained not in isolation but always in our social interactions with the people in the community. It requires us to look beyond ourselves and place the other at the center. Justice is paying attention to the rights of others and seeing to it that we give what is due to them. It recognizes that others have rights, and we are responsible for respecting and aiding their realizations.

Justice entails that we have a responsibility to fulfill- to give what is due to the other. 'Justice concerns not the internal, but the external human actions in the world' (Goodwin, 1989, 276). Justice is not a vehicle to attain our personal and selfish desires in life, but a conscious response to the demands of others, other than ourselves. It is always other-centered and never self-serving. Justice disposes the individual to render what properly belongs to the other (Abogado, 2008). It is the work of justice to secure and protect what properly belongs to the other- a house, a land, a car, and other properties. Therefore, taking what legally and innately belongs to the other is an injustice.

Therefore, a person who possesses the virtue of justice thinks nothing of himself/herself but of others. Just actions are always directed to the fulfillment of the well-being of the community. 'While other virtues, as we have seen, are directed to the good of the agent, justice is directed to right relations with others' (Darr, 2019, p. 333). Ironically, in our contemporary times, many only demand their rights but do not commit to responsibility. While there is nothing wrong with demanding what is appropriate for us, it contradicts Thomas Aquinas' justice if we only focus on our rights without relating them to responsibility. Justice demands that we become responsible for building harmonious relationships with others by giving what is due to them.

3.2 JUSTICE IS ALWAYS FOR THE COMMUNITY

Thomas Aquinas divides justice into two generic categories: particular justice and general justice. He writes: 'And in this sense it belongs to special justice to do good considered as due to one's neighbor, and to avoid the opposite evil, that, namely, which is hurtful to one's neighbor; while it belongs to general justice to do good





in relation to the community or in relation to God, and to avoid the opposite evil' (ST II-II, q. 79, art. 1). Hence, justice not only regulates our relations with individuals but also ensures the welfare of the entire community. The good of the community precedes the good of the individual in the community. It does not mean that the good of the community is contrary to the good of the individual, but it is implied that what is good for the community is also good for all members of the community.

Justice requires that individuals render what is good to the community. The community is the locus where the person can practice and concretize acts of justice. Darr (2019) writes: 'General justice concerns the agent in her relations to others generally and directs her acts to the common good' (p. 332). Justice reminds members of the community of their responsibility to ensure the good of the community, even when it is against their perceived personal good. Justice means that the community's good prevails over the members' personal good.

Justice guarantees that no one is left behind without enjoying what is proper as a member of the community. Hence, to render what is good to the community is to ensure that no member is excluded. Keys (2006) notes: 'Aquinas' legal justice as a virtue must aim at nothing less than the fully human social telos, the good of the community and all of its members' (p. 187). The person always belongs to the community and is never apart from it, so whatever happens to the community inevitably affects the members. Thomas Aquinas declares: 'He who serves a community serves all the people who are contained under that community' (ST II-II, q. 58, art. 5). A person is never isolated from the community. Therefore, the good of the community is always good for its members. Vogt (2007) writes 'that the good of the individual is

inseparable from the good of the community of which she or he is a part' (397). Frémeaux (2020) asserts that 'based on the philosophical Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition, the common good is a set of conditions that favor both the pursuit of a community good and the personal fulfillment of each member of the community' (p. 200).

Meanwhile, justice regulates individual relationships among people to serve the interests of the community rather than its individual members. Although the proper relationship among individuals is essential in advancing justice, it is never a private business between two persons devoid of its communal dimension. Marx (2023) argues: 'When we speak of the common good, we mean first the fundamental conditions in which it is made possible for people to live with one another constructively' (pp. 4-5). A just relationship between people always exists at the service of the community where they belong, since they are inseparable from the community.

Consequently, justice in the community requires that each person 'contribute[s] to the good of the community through cooperation and personal responsibility' (Frémeaux, 2020, p. 214). In that sense, individual acts should conform to the good of the community in which his/her activities always directly or indirectly affect the whole community. It means that a just act always contributes to the flourishing of all members of the community. Justice requires that every member of the community must contribute according to his/her capacity to the good of the community. Justice goes beyond personal interest, which may restrain the well-being of the community. Justice may require individuals to sacrifice their interests in place of the welfare of the entire community. Keys (2006) avers: 'Aquinas' theory of justice thus indicates a route to overcome individualism without overlooking





the individual' (p. 199). Justice may sometimes demand that an individual sacrifice his/her right over the rights of all members of the community. It does not mean that justice is against individual rights since it always secures the rights of all and excludes no one in the community: It is because all share the good of the community.

Thus, justice is always directed to the good of the community. It is unthinkable for a just person not to consider the good of the community and concentrate only on his/her personal goal in life. Justice and the common good are inextricably tied to each other, and it is inconceivable to presume an individualistic person to be a just person at the same time.

3.3 JUSTICE ALWAYS RESTORES WHAT IS LOST

For Thomas Aquinas, justice demands that one must return or compensate what s/he has taken from the other. Taking something that properly belongs to the other or the community is an injustice. In his words: 'Restitution belongs to justice because it re-establishes equality. But if one were to restore what one did not take, there would not be equality. Therefore, it is not just to make such a restitution' (ST II-II, q. 62, art. 4). Hence, possessing something that does not belong to you would result in inequality contrary to justice. For instance, a robbery is a form of injustice because it forcibly takes what belongs to the other; justice demands that the robber return or compensate for what is taken from the other or the community. In this sense, justice requires that individuals be held accountable for the harm, abuse, and exploitation they have done against others. Returning or compensating for the harm inflicted on the other is essential in attaining justice.

In line with this, Gomez (1995) asserts: 'Indebtedness as a property of justice signifies that

the demand for justice is not answered by a gift but by the obligation to pay back what belongs to another' (p. 255). When an individual cries out for justice, they essentially desire to restore what rightfully belongs to them. Restoration could be in the form of material possessions, personal rights, or opportunities that have been unjustly deprived by others or society. It is essential to recognize that such deprivation constitutes an act of injustice. Therefore, seeking justice means reclaiming what has been unjustly taken away.

Furthermore, when someone is deprived of their natural rights as a human being, it constitutes an act of injustice against their inherent dignity. Each person is created in God's image and likeness, which affirms their intrinsic worth and value. Depriving someone of their natural rights, such as the right to life, liberty, or basic needs, is an affront to their dignity as a human being. Abogado (2008) notes: 'Justice is that virtue which disposes an individual to act righteously in all matters in relation to others directing him to give to what properly belongs to another and to do nothing that will cause another injury' (p.49). By obstructing the fulfillment of natural rights, these actions strip individuals of their agency and impede their ability to live with dignity and self-determination. They perpetuate inequality, dehumanize individuals, and undermine the potential for personal growth and flourishing.

Moreover, Thomas Aquinas conveys: 'The chief end of restitution is, not that he who has more than his due may cease to have it, but that he who has less than his due may be compensated' (ST II-II, q. 62, art. 6). The overall demand of justice is to give what is due to the other, especially if this due is already innate in the person as created by God in his image and likeness. Justice aims to compensate the person who has less due to the deprivation of his/her inalienable rights, such as the right to life and freedom. Depriving a person





of one's life and freedom violates his innate and inviolable rights as a human being, and doing so is a form of injustice.

Indeed, the ultimate goal of justice is to restore what rightfully belongs to individuals. It encompasses the fair treatment and protection of people's rights, ensuring they can live free from harm and hindrance. Any action that directly or indirectly obstructs a person's well-being and hampers their ability to lead a fulfilling life is considered unjust and deserves criticism.

4. APPLYING THOMAS AQUINAS' IDEA OF JUSTICE TO ENVIRONMENTAL CRISES

Thomas Aquinas speaks of justice as directing one's actions to the common good, particularly in his exposition of justice as a general virtue and on legal justice. He writes: 'It follows, therefore, that the good of any virtue, whether such virtue directs man in relation to himself or in relation to certain other individual persons, is preferable to the common good, to which justice directs' (ST II-II, q. 58, art. 5). In other words, justice aims at realizing the common good, whether that action is intended for the individual or the community as a whole. Thomas Aquinas believes in the interdependence of the individual with the community and that the good of the individual should always flow to the community and vice versa. Thus, the principle of the common good directs that all actions toward the 'other' must always benefit the community and, consequently, all its members.

In *Laudato Si*, Francis (2015) expands the force of the option for the poor by connecting it to the principle of the common good, a principle that now includes care for the earth. In this connection, he presents the preferential option for the poor as an ethical imperative to promote

participation in the common good. Pope Francis' move to include the environment or Mother Earth, in our practice of the common good, can be understood through the lens that the environment is intimately related to the lives of the poor. For instance, when typhoons and other natural disasters hit the land, the poor suffer the worst impacts of the devastation. Ironically, they are the last to recover from the aftermath because they lack the resources to rebuild and restore what had been destroyed by the disasters. Hence, practicing common sense towards the environment is to protect the lives, livelihood, and property of the poor during natural calamities.

In line with this, Francis (2015) declares: 'Today, however, we have to realize that a true ecological approach always becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment so as to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor' (p. 49). In other words, we are no longer facing two unrelated issues: environmental issues on the one hand and social or political issues on the other end. Francis (2015) adds: 'The human environment and the natural environment deteriorate together; we cannot adequately combat environmental degradation unless we attend to causes related to human and social degradation' (p. 48). Thus, poverty is perceived as a result of environmental exploitation and abuse fueled by a society prioritizing profits, utility, and capitalism over the rights and welfare of the poor, who depend on the environment for their livelihood. Hence, poverty can be traced back to the ongoing exploitation and degradation of natural resources.

Sometimes we view our relationship with the environment as one-sided; this one-sided relationship treats the environment as a mere object created for the sole benefit of human beings. There is no mutuality and reciprocity in





this kind of relationship since it simply reduces the existence of the environment to the sole purpose of providing the needs of humanity. In short, the environment exists for humanity alone, and humanity can create limitless possibilities for the environment. In this situation, individuals only highlight their rights over the environment, not their responsibilities. For Thomas Aquinas, it violates justice because the relationship in a just society always includes the mutual interplay of rights and responsibility. He asserts: 'Justice alone, of all the virtues, fulfills the notion of duty.' (ST I-II, q. 99, art. 5). For this reason, justice urges humanity to be responsible towards the environment. Thomas Aquinas' incorporation of responsibility in our relationship, whether with fellow human beings or the environment, has important practical implications for our understanding of the environment. On that account, justice is a remedy to humanity's tendency to exploit and abuse the environment and can cultivate a culture of care instead of control and neglect.

Our relationships with the environment should be mutual and reciprocal. We benefit and take what we need from the environment while, at the same time, we protect and nurture the environment. In *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis highlights the mutual and reciprocal responsibility between humans and the environment. In his commentary on Genesis 1:28, in which the biblical account commands human beings to have dominion over the earth, Francis (2015) concluded: 'Tilling refers to cultivating, plowing or working, while "keeping" means caring, protecting, overseeing and preserving. This implies a relationship of mutual responsibility between human beings and nature' (p. 67). Beltran (2020) affirms Pope Francis when he states: 'The Earth is not an external reality that we may simply exploit and dominate for our own use. What is good for the earth is also good for humanity' (p. 41). To

put it negatively, what is harmful and damaging to creations is simultaneously harmful and damaging to humanity, especially to the poor, mostly farmers and fishers of the village. In other words, we reap what we sow in our mutual and reciprocal relationship with the environment.

Unfortunately, the relationship of many people today with the environment is motivated by consumerism, utilitarianism, capitalism, and industrialization, which continue to worsen the deterioration and degradation of the environment. Humanity enters what Pope Francis (2015) calls the logic of 'use and throw-away' (p. 123). It is the same logic that influenced political leaders, institutions, and even the government to allow mining, quarrying, and illegal logging despite the cry of the poor and indigenous people to stop these activities because of the adverse effects that they caused to the forest, mountains, rivers, and seas, which are the very source of their livelihood. Beltran (2020) reflects: 'When humans put themselves at the center of the universe, all that would be important to them would be their own immediate gratification' (p. 42). Personal interest intensified by power, greed, and money blinded many people to their greater responsibility to the community, especially the poor and the indigenous people. When money and power become the primary stimuli of humanity's response and relationship with the environment, the talk of the common good disappears, and the poor suffer the consequence. Then, the poor are left in the peripheries crying for justice that sometimes, if not always, is not heard by the authority. Hrynkow (2019) best captures the implication of individualism to the poor when he notes: 'Whenever our interior life becomes caught up in its own interests and concerns, there is no longer room for others, no place for the poor' (p. 590).





Gomez (1995) opines: 'Like the Fathers of the Church, St. Thomas teaches that the goods of the earth were created by God for all. The use of the goods of the earth is universal, that is, for all humans' (pp. 262-263). Justice obliges us to measure our activities in the light of their impacts on the environment, which is the very source of the poor's subsistence. Hence, part of Thomas Aquinas' justice is looking into our daily actions within our responsibility to uphold the good of the community, particularly the poor, through our relationship with the environment. Because humanity tends to capitalize on personal interest and gains at the expense of the environment instead of the welfare of the community, especially the poor, 'Justice requires that we recognize our climate-affecting activity as an aspect of our lives that is subject to public scrutiny and demands for moral justification' (Darr, 2019, p. 335). Thus, justice urges us to engage in deep reflection and examination of consciousness to review our daily activities that may exacerbate the conditions of the environment.

In addition, justice, for Thomas Aquinas, exhorts all human beings not to create chaos by damaging or taking one's source of livelihood. Thomas Aquinas notes: 'Likewise, the operations of justice are ordered to the preservation of peace among men, by means of each man having his own possessions undisturbed' (Aquinas, *Contra Gentiles* 34, p. 2). For instance, agricultural land owned and cultivated by a farmer is not only the source of his/her life's subsistence but also his/her very life. Therefore, taking that land from the farmer is tantamount to taking the life of the farmer and his/her family because, without that land, they could not survive. For that reason, they will do everything to protect their land from the land grabbers. Hence, for Thomas Aquinas, justice is ordered to promote peace in the community, and peace means setting aside our economic interest in the poor's source of life,

the environment. In this sense, justice means allowing them to cultivate their land by not directly engaging in or encouraging activities that may damage the environment.

Instead of aggravating the environmental crisis, Thomas Aquinas implicitly urges us that, for commutative justice, we must help rebuild what has been lost from the environment due to human activities. Human activities that exploit and abuse the environment, such as illegal logging, mining, quarrying, and the like, are equivalent to stealing from the poor in the community what rightfully belongs to them. Thomas Aquinas declares: 'Restitution is opposed to taking away. Now it is an act of commutative injustice to take away what belongs to another. Therefore, to restore it is an act of that justice which directs commutations' (ST II-II, q. 62, art. 1). Hence, it is the fundamental characteristic of justice to return what is taken and to restore or rebuild what has been lost. Thomas Aquinas' concept of commutative justice, although it pertains to the relationship between two individual persons, has direct consequences for the community because every person is always part of the community, especially when it involves the restoration of the environment, for the environment is a common home of all. Thomas Aquinas affirms it when he articulates: 'Wherefore, any good or evil done to the member of a society redounds on the whole society: thus, who hurts the hand, hurts the man' (ST I-II, q. 21, art. 3). Thus, to restore what has been lost to the person amounts to giving it back to the entire community.

5. CONCLUSION

Aquinas' concept of justice aims to foster equal and mutual relations between individuals, the community to individual, and the individual to the community. Thomas Aquinas underlines





the principle of the common good as the fundamental characteristic of justice, particularly general justice or legal justice. 'General justice concerns the agent in her relations to others generally and directs her acts to the common good (Darr, 2019, 332). Thomas Aquinas' stress on the principle of the common good as a constitutive element of justice has practical implications on environmental crises that Pope Francis highlighted in *Laudato Si*.

For Pope Francis, environmental crises can be solved when the principle of the common good regulates people's actions and relations; on the one hand, Thomas Aquinas elucidates justice as a way of regulating human action toward the common good. Hence, justice demands that people's actions must continuously pursue the good of the community. Therefore, Thomas Aquinas' concept of justice is necessary in addressing environmental crises that the world is facing right now. Thomas Aquinas' justice proposes the principle of the common good as a criterion for measuring our relationship with the environment to ameliorate the conditions of the poor in the community.

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