

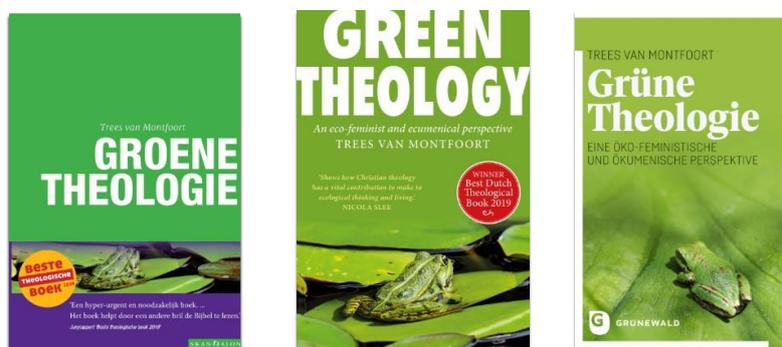
Biblical Perspective on Creation, Lizari, Latvia 2-6-2022

(C) Trees van Montfoort

I am very glad to be here and meet you, creative women caring for creation.

I am going to tell you something about my research in ecotheologie. In 2019 I published a book: *Groene theologie*, that has been vowed best theological book of the year in the Netherlands. Since a few months there is an updated version in English: *Green Theology, an eco-feminist and ecological perspective*. And next year a German version is forseen. (I am doing crowdfunding for it.) The title will be: *Grüne Theologie, eine ecofeministische und ökumenische Perspektive*.

Green Theology/ Grüne Theologie
an eco-feminist and ecological perspective



Outline of the lecture

- 1. the vulnerability of our world: the ecological crisis as a spiritual crisis
- 2. creation stories in the Bible and the Canticle of Creation
- 3. Laudato Si' and the creativity of women (the woman at the well)

I will start with the ecological crisis and argue why it is a spiritual crisis and not just a set of practical problems. It has to do with our believes.

Then I will go into some of the many creation stories in the Bible. Not only about the seven days of the first chapter of Genesis, but also about Lady Wisdom, Christ as Creator and the Creation Psalms, which inspired Saint Francis to write his Canticle of Creation.

The ecological encyclical Laudato Si' is named after this song of Saint Francis. I will give a short outline and an evaluation of this document from the perspective of women and our creativity.

And I will finish with the story of the Samaritan woman at the well, as told by John the evangelist.

1. the vulnerability of our world: the ecological crisis as a spiritual crisis

climat change

Our vulnerable world is wounded and violated in many ways. The ecological crisis is not only about the climat crisis, it is also about the decrease of biodiversity and the many forms of pollution. I start with the climat. The IPCC, the climat panel of the UN, warns again and again that climat change is going faster than everyone expected. Last year we experienced

temperatures of nearly 50 degrees in the south of Europe. In India people were dying of heat last month and parts of the country are becoming unfit for humans to survive.

Periods of great droughts and periods of heavy rainfall will occur more often. The poor in the world are affected most of all people. Farmers in Africa don't know when to sow and to plant, because the start of the rainy season has become unpredictable.

pollution

In 1972 the Club of Rome already warned that the earth could not endlessly provide in the accelerating demand for commodities. Oil companies already knew in the eighties that our use of fuels was causing a warming of the earth. Governments had the same information. But the search for new oil sources is still going on.

The oil sands in Alberta, Canada, have unconventional oil reserves equal to the conventional oil reserves of the rest of the world. Many companies extract the bitumen from these oil sands

Surface mining is a category of mining in which soil and rock are removed (in contrast to underground mining, in which the overlying rock is left in place, and the mineral is removed through shafts or tunnels.) In North America, surface mining became popular throughout the 20th century, and surface mines now produce most of the coal mined in the United States.

It is cheaper and safer than underground mining, but much more dangerous for human health and for the environment. It causes cardiovascular diseases, food, and water contamination. The environment is totally destroyed.

(<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alberta#Industry>,

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Surface_mining)

These kinds of destruction can also be seen in the Amazon, Siberia and other parts of the world where indigenous peoples live and where we see a dramatic loss of a rich biodiversity.

biodiversity

Each two years the WWF publishes a report on biodiversity loss. They monitor the population sizes of mammals, birds, fish, amphibians and reptiles. The Living Planet Report 2020 reports: 'The the population sizes have seen an alarming average drop of 68% since 1970.' In other words: in 50 years there is a loss of 68% of numbers of vertebrates in the world. Less than a third is left. Nature is declining globally at rates unprecedented in millions of years.'

Not every region has seen the same losses. In Europe and Central Asia it is 24%, in Africa it is the same as the world's average drop. But in Latin America in 50 years nature has declined with 94%. Only 6% is left. I couldn't believe it when I saw this the first time. What were the causes for this immense loss? It has to do with cutting woods for mining, for keeping cattle and for growing crop for cattle. Population growth and urbanisation is a problem too. But much faster than the human population is growing, is the increase worldwide in the numbers of cows, pigs and chickens. They eat a lot of grains and soya.

The regions that are most affected by biodiversity loss are not the regions that have the highest rates of consumption. A lot of the devastation of the environment in the south of the world is caused by the consumption in the north.

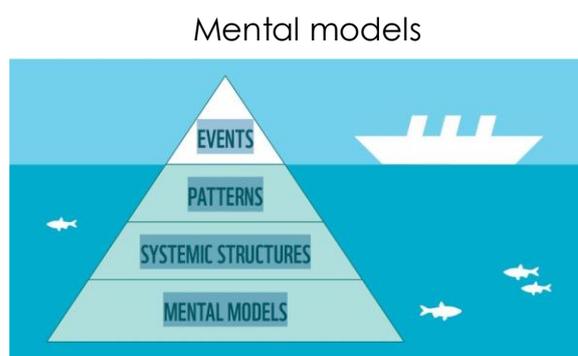
What price to pay for development?

'What price to pay for development?' asked the Dutch and Belgian catholic missionary organisations in 1989. A lot of their projects tried to increase the income of the people in the south. Was this real development, is this real welfare? they started to wonder.

Income per capita is often used for measuring degrees of welfare, but income level does not reveal everything. Take, for instance, someone living in a shantytown earning five dollars a day, who at the same time must pay a one-dollar bus ticket to get to work, and must likewise pay for food, water and her children's education. This person is certainly poorer than someone who earns just two dollars a day, but grows her own vegetables, keeps some chickens and a goat; nearby is a forest and clean water, and she enjoys free school education and healthcare. Many programmes for stimulating the economy have discarded all these elements. Deregulation, privatising and economising on social welfare have been the current policies for targeting economic growth.

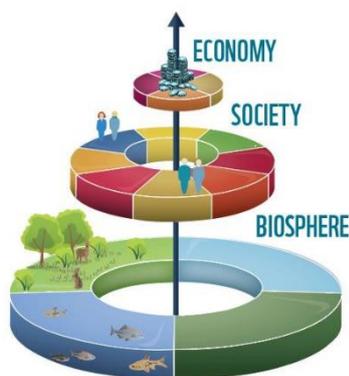
The way our economy is organised appears overall as self-evident. Who *really* profits from an economic system and whether the earth is able to support it is not part of this economic theory.

mental models



As it has become clear that the ecological crisis is more than just a series of practical problems that can be solved by the usual means, it now becomes necessary to look deeper into the more fundamental causes of this crisis. What are the patterns and the systems? What are the cultural, ideological and religious reasons? What is wrong with our worldview, and do we have an alternative? Is a different worldview, mental model or paradigm possible?

economy-society-biosphere



We have a false picture of the world if earning money is the goal of our society, if our human society is no longer seen as part of the worldwide community of all living beings.

Human society depends on the biosphere and economy is just one aspect of society.

As the director of the WWF says: 'A deep cultural and systemic shift is urgently needed, one that so far our civilisation has failed to embrace: a transition to a society and economic system that values nature. We must rebalance our relationship with the planet to preserve the Earth's amazing diversity of life and enable a just, healthy and prosperous society – and ultimately to ensure our own survival.'

the guilt of christianity

Christianity is part of the problem. In 1966 Lynn White, a historian, opened up a debate about the role of religion in the western worldview. He blamed Christian churches for their anthropocentric theology. The churches are only interested in humans, he said, and have degraded nature to a commodity. He wrote:

‘Especially in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen. [...] Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects’

Christianity had prepared the ground for western natural science and technology, according to White. The churches justified technological dominance over nature as being in line with God’s plan. Bible texts that placed humans right in the middle of creation (especially Genesis 1’s commandment to subdue the earth), gave rise to an anthropocentric, exploitative worldview, according to White. White maintains that ‘Christianity bears a huge burden of guilt’.

Did Christianity enable a worldview that caused the ecological crisis or was Christianity just shaped by the world in which it lived? This is really a chicken-and-egg issue. The only thing that one *can* say is that modern theology and modern culture are interwoven and, therefore, that Christianity is partly to be blamed.

For White it is equally obvious that one must find a solution that involves belief. White put it like this: ‘More science and more technology are not going to get us out of the present ecologic crisis until we find a new religion, or rethink our old one. [...] Since the roots of our trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious.’ He took Francis of Assisi as an example in ‘his belief in the virtue of humility not merely for the individual but for man as a species. Francis tried to depose man from his monarchy over creation and set up a democracy of all God’s creatures’.

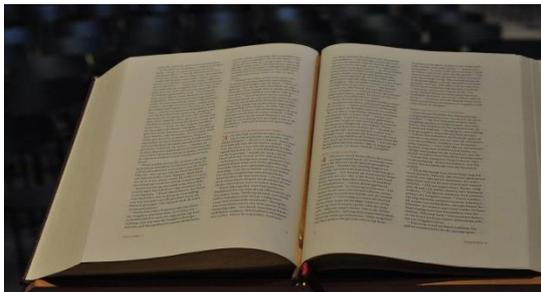
hierarchical dualisms

There is another trace in western culture, that White doesn’t mention. In a lot of cultures there are differences between certain categories of people: some are considered as being above nature and others as part of it. Nature is often depicted as female: it is mother earth who brings forth life. Women through their menses and pregnancies were seen as standing closer to nature; as the bearers of new life, they were more defined by their body, more earth-like. Cultures where nature was held in high esteem gave women more credit, and vice versa: where women were held in high regard, nature was also well assessed.

In western culture it did not work out well for women and nature. Both were compared to higher-regarded entities: men and culture. A body of hierarchical dualisms came into being. Inferior were earth, nature, women, body, emotion, wilderness; superior were heaven, culture, men, spirit, reason, civilisation. The idea that civilised rational men should dominate over women, nature and non-western people – the ‘savages’ – is deeply ingrained in our culture and can be traced back to Aristotle. Women and nature are both still spoken of in terms of conquering and possessing.

2. creation stories in the Bible and the Canticle of Creation

the Bibel



The Bible is very often read with the biases I mentioned. We see a strong anthropocentrism, indifference to nature and hierarchical dualisms. If you read through an ecological lens, as I did, you find something else:

- God creates and saves the whole earth, and not just us, human beings.
- The non-human reality plays a significant part in the Bible and has agency.

the first creation story Genesis 1:1-2:4

The first creation story of Genesis 1 has been very influential, and everyone seems to already have a clear picture of its meaning. Therefore it is even more necessary to interpret carefully what the text actually says.

The beginning: the earth is a formless void; darkness is on the face of the deep. God's Spirit is over the face of the waters.			
Day 1	Day and night	Day 4	Heavenly bodies
Day 2	Sea and heaven's vault	Day 5	Sea life and birds
Day 3	Dry land and plants	Day 6	Land animals and humans
Day 7: God's work is finished. God rests, blesses the seventh day and hallows it.			

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The starting position is not that there was previously nothing at all: earth existed already, a formless void, or formless and empty. A mass of water is covered in darkness; God's breath/Spirit/wind is present and moves. It hovers, blows or breeds over the waters. Does God's creating activities begin in verse 3 or already here in verse 2? A dualistic reading of the second verse of Genesis has legitimised a negative image of women and the earth. In some interpretations God is battling against mother Earth.

But God acting is described not as battling, but as dividing. Light and darkness are divided, and water is separated in two, one part kept under the earth and one part above the earth. Creating in the sense of making something new starts in verse 7, with the stretching out of heaven's vault. Dry land is separated from the sea, plants can start to grow. On the third day the home is habitable and on the following days the inhabitants appear one by one: The heavenly bodies, sea life and birds and land animals and humans. God is interacting with the earth: God lets the earth bring forth.

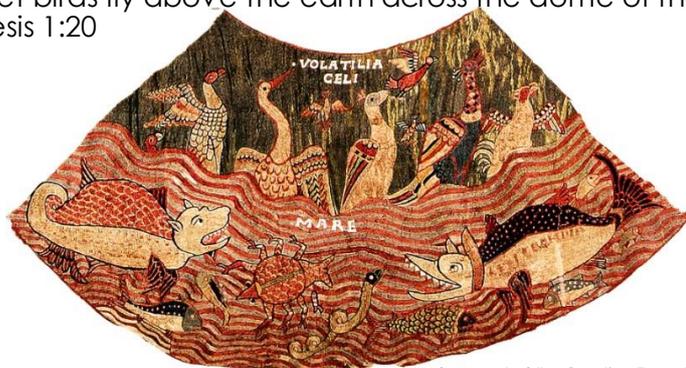
On the same day as earth brings forth cattle, creeping things and wild animals, God makes people. They are blessed and are commanded to be fruitful, like the beasts of the sea and the birds; they are given plants to eat, just as the animals are. They must subdue the earth, rule over the fish, the birds and the beasts that crawl on earth. Humans are made in God's image.

The refrain is: and God saw that it was good. On the sixth day, when God looks at *everything* he has made, God closes by saying: *very good!* Everything together is very good in God's eyes. The crown of creation is the sabbath. On the seventh day God rests and hallows this day.

Sunday rest can be of great ecological importance by interrupting the economic pressure to produce and consume, fostering an awareness of other values, and offering a foretaste of more just relationships among people and between people and the rest of creation.

So, in Genesis 1, everything does not revolve solely around people. It is a hymn that commences with God's Spirit that moves over the primal flood and terminates with God resting after seeing that everything turns out to be very good. Humans have their own part in the greater whole in which everything is connected. They are creatures among other creatures. Animals are pictured in all their diversity. Creating is an ongoing movement of God's Spirit that allows life to come into existence from what is undefined in interaction with earth and its inhabitants.

'Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures,
and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky.'
Genesis 1:20



fragment of the Creation Tapestry, Girona

This is a fragment of the creation tapestry in Girona, made in the 11th or 12th century by Benedictine nuns. I consider it as a form of women's theology in a time when women were denied studying theology.

The famous Catholic feminist theologian Rosemary Redford Ruether (1936-2022) formulated it clearly: "God is not a 'being' removed from creation, ruling it from outside in the manner of a patriarchal ruler; God is the source of being that underlies creation and grounds its nature and future potentation for continual transformative renewal in biophilic mutuality."

the 2nd creation story Genesis. 2: 4-25

- The garden of Eden: earth and water
- Man made of earth, with life's breath
- Like other living beings (Gen 7:9)

This creation narrative also underlines the solidarity between women and men with each other and with the rest of creation. Humans and animals are all made of the same stuff, from dust, formed out of earth. Humans and animals share even the same breath of life.

Wisdom/Sophia

There are much more creation stories in the Bible than the first two stories in Genesis. In a lot of them God's wisdom plays an important role. In the bible books Psalms, Proverbs,



Ecclesiastes, the Song of Songs, Wisdom and Sirach God's wisdom is often pictured as a female. E.g. in Proverbs 8. Lady Wisdom says of herself:

'The Everlasting begot me, the beginning of his works,
the forerunner of his deeds of long ago;
From of old I was formed,
at the first, before the earth.
When there were no deeps I was brought forth,
when there were no fountains or springs of water;
Before the mountains were settled into place,
before the hills, I was brought forth.' (Proverbs 8: 30-31, NABRE)

Wisdom is of divine origin. She is represented in wisdom literature as existing before all things, firstborn of creation, image of God and executor of God's works. She has an intimate relation with God and with the whole creation. One could say: she is fully God and fully part of the world.

Christ as Wisdom/Sophia

This wisdom tradition is very important in understanding Jesus. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza showed that in her book *Jesus: Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet*. The New Testament connects God's wisdom in several ways with Jesus. In Matthew, Jesus identifies himself as Wisdom. He says so explicitly – 'Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds' (Matthew 11:19) – and implicitly when he presents himself as a humble teacher who cries out for pupils:



'Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.' (Matthew 11:28-30)

Jesus passes his wisdom on to his disciples: 'For I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict' (Luke 21:15)

The hymn in the letter of Paul to the Colossians praises Christ as creator and firstborn of creation. It might well be pre-Christian Jewish, because the motifs are directly borrowed from wisdom literature.

'He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created,' (Colossians 1:15-17)

What is said in Paul's letter about Christ has been said earlier about Lady Wisdom. 'He is the image of God', not just like the image with which every human being is endowed according to Genesis 1, but fully and unveiled, as was said about Wisdom:

'For she is the reflection of eternal light, the spotless mirror of the power of God, the image of his goodness' (Wisdom 7:26).

At the beginning of the Gospel of John, Christ is presented as creator. A hymn of Lady Wisdom is directly applied to Christ. The Greek word *logos* is usually translated as Word, but can also mean Wisdom. The German translation *Bibel in gerechter Sprache* does this in its translation of John 1:

*In the beginning was Wisdom
and Wisdom was with God
and Wisdom was like God.
She was in the beginning with God.
Everything came into being through her
and without her nothing came into being.
What came into existence in her, was life,
and life was light for the people. (John 1:1–4)
She was in the world and the world came through her into
existence,*

The link between Christ and Lady Wisdom is relevant to an ecofeminist theology for at least three reasons.

1. the whole of reality – without distinguishing between material and spiritual, human and non-human – is linked with God.
2. the connection resonates similarly in Christ.
3. Christ is being identified with a female figure. This differs clearly from the usual male and hierarchical image of Christ as ruler of the cosmos that legitimises human ruling of the earth.

Sophia is God's feminine face which implicates the creation and salvation of the whole earth. Wisdom/Word belongs to God from the beginning. This beginning has not to be taken historically, no more than 'in the beginning' of Genesis 1. Because creation is about God's ongoing relationship and involvement with the whole world.

Psalm 104

I would like to move on to another creation story, the beautiful Psalm 104. In Psalm 104 the earth is described as an ecosystem in which everything is interconnected and depends on God. It starts with a description of the stretching out of heaven's vault like a tent, the clouds, wind and fire, and the separation of the waters (vv.2-9), similar to Genesis 1. From then on life appears on earth, in the air and in the sea in all its inner cohesion:

*You made springs flow in wadies
that wind among the mountains.
They give drink to every beast of the field;*

*here wild asses quench their thirst.
Beside them the birds of heaven nest;
among the branches they sing. (Psalm 104:10-12)*

The next verses talk of woods and mountains and everything living in them, including humans. It is God who feeds all living creatures (27-28) and through God's breath everything comes to life. Psalm 104 contains the most vivid portrayal of the whole of creation

forests sing

The non-human reality plays a significant part in a lot of texts. And non-humans have agency, they are able to act by themselves. As they are called to do in this text of Isaiah:



Creation Psalms contain similar passages. For modern western people they are difficult to understand, because we have lost the sense of seeing nature animated as entities in their own right.

the Canticle of Creation

Saint Francis, in the 13th century, still understood them. In his canticle of creation he uses the language of the psalms:

*Be praised, my Lord, through all your creatures,
especially through my lord Brother Sun,
*who brings the day; and you give light through him.
And he is beautiful and radiant in all his splendour!
Of you, Most High, he bears the likeness.*
Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Moon
and the stars, in heaven you formed them
clear and precious and beautiful.
Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Wind,
and through the air, cloudy and serene,
and every kind of weather through which
You give sustenance to Your creatures.
Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Water,
[... through Brother Fire,
[...] through Sister Mother Earth,*

who sustains us and governs us and who produces varied fruits with coloured flowers and herbs.

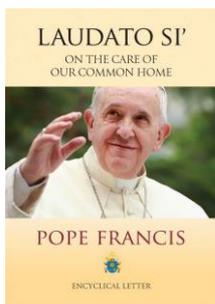
the Bible: conclusion

In my view the Bible can function as a mirror for modern people by showing a different worldview. And I sum up the main issues:

- God creates and saves the whole earth, and not just us, human beings.
- The non-human reality plays a significant part and has agency.
- The role of human beings in relation to the Earth is, first of all, to be aware that one is a creature among other creatures.
- Texts about God creating often represent God with female characteristics, as Spirit or as giving birth or as Lady Wisdom. In the New Testament Jesus is even portrayed as incarnation of Wisdom. I found in the Bible a pictures God as very much cooperating with the earth.
- Christ as the incarnation of Wisdom and saviour of the world demolishes the hierarchical dualisms of God and the earth, spirit and matter, male and female in favour of the diversity of creation.

3. Laudato Si' and the creativity of women

Pope Francis: Laudato Si'



“Laudato si’, mi’ Signore” – “Praise be to you, my Lord [...] through our Sister, Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us.” With these words from the Song of Creation of Francis of Assisi begins the encyclical *Laudato Si’: On the care for our common home*.

The Pope quotes his name-giver because he is worried about pollution, climate change and other ecological threats and he searches for a believing way of looking at the environment.

chapter 1: the threats

In the first chapter of the encyclical, Pope Francis sums up the threats of ‘our common home’. An ecological and a social approach go hand in hand ‘to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor’. This refers to the title of a book of liberation theologian Leonardo Boff. The pope mentions the preferential option for the poorest as they suffer most from ecological problems. He states: ‘the earth herself, burdened and laid waste, is among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor’.

chapter 2 the Bible

In the second chapter he looks into the biblical sources about the care of nature and the poor. In his exposition of the creation stories in Genesis he denies that humans in the image of God

have absolute power over other creatures. All living and non-living beings have their own value before God. And the dualism of later times can't be seen in Jesus. Jesus, he says, 'was far removed from philosophies which despised the body, matter and the things of the world.' God chose even to enter into the created cosmos through Jesus.'

chapter 3 the underlying cause

Pope Francis criticizes our western worldview. In chapter three he identifies the underlying cause of the ecological crisis as 'the dominant technocratic paradigm', which is the dominant idea that humans can master the whole of reality through technology. A small group of people appropriate the right to subdue other people and nature in order to reach their highest goal: the maximisation of profit.

chapter 4 integral ecology

Chapter four presents an 'integral ecology', that is to say, a vision of the interactions between natural systems and social systems.

Everything is indeed connected with everything. Not only the natural heritage, but also our historic, artistic and cultural heritage are in danger. Economic globalisation, which considers people as being consumers, is a threat to cultural diversity and in particular to the original population of, for instance, Latin America. In some parts of big cities daily life is full of violence and estrangement; rural areas are often neglected. More should be done for public spaces, housing and public service.

chapter 5 rules for politics and sciences

Chapter five contains some rules for politics and sciences. Conferences on ecological issues have hardly been successful, says the Pope. Politics should be more transparent, and certainly more local and with long-term views.

He distrusts companies advertising sustainable growth: 'It absorbs the language and values of ecology into the categories of finance and technocracy', It is often mere marketing and image building.

He relativises empirical sciences. They cannot explain all of reality.

chapter 6 ecological repentance

All in all we are in need of an ecological repentance. This requires a basic attitude of thankfulness and impartiality, being aware that every creature mirrors something of God, sobriety and humility, an attitude of attentiveness and love for everything existing, and brotherhood and sisterhood with all our fellow creatures.

Pope Francis calls for ecological repentance, which means not just doing some things in a bit greener way, but treating our co-creatures as brothers and sisters in our common home.

critical observations to Laudato Si'

- lack of gender awareness
- theology based on 'natural law'
- population growth

Apart from all the good things that should be said about this encyclical, I have also some critical observations.

One is that it lacks gender awareness. The Pope could have known that women, among the poor, suffer most from environmental problems. He doesn't mention this.

The pope doesn't show any awareness of the connection between abortion and poverty either. The encyclical mentions abortion several times as an example of a technocratic way of ruling nature. The Vatican rules of sexuality and procreation would belong to the natural order of things. In its application of the term natural law, moral laws get the appearance of self-evidence. Natural law is a dangerous concept of nature.

Pope Francis asserts also that population growth is not a cause of the ecological crisis. He certainly has a point when he says that the West sometimes all too easily blames the world's problems on population growth. As if people in developing countries are the biggest polluters and not the westerners who spread themselves around the globe. He justly points out though the unequal sharing of goods. But even if this sharing were more equal, population growth would still be a problem. Population growth damages the environment, just as the ever-growing economy does.

the woman at the well 'where then can you get this living water?' (John 4: 11)

I will end my lecture with the creativity of women that a vulnerable world calls for.



(This is a little medieval statue of my hometown, Utrecht.)

I suppose you know the story of Jesus speaking with a Samaritan woman at a well (John 4:5–42). Jesus is going through Samaritan territory and takes a rest at a well that is named after the biblical ancestor Jacob. A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, 'Give me a drink.' [...] The Samaritan woman said to him, 'How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?' [...] Jesus answered her, 'If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, "Give me a drink," you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.' (John 4:7–10)

The two start a theological discussion about three topics: water, her life, and the correct way and place of praying to God.

This text has often led to a dualistic and sexist reading: the dumb woman keeps on talking about drinking water whereas Jesus speaks symbolically of water as God's word. But the woman is not more stupid than all the others who do not understand Jesus immediately. Like many stories in the gospel of John disbelief turns to belief and misunderstanding to full understanding. Both the woman and Jesus talk about water in more than one sense. For the woman, water is a symbol for the harshness of daily life. Drawing water every day is a heavy chore. It would be nice if one did not have to do it anymore, but without water no one can survive. Jesus agrees that water is essential to life, but also points to himself as life's true source: 'Jesus himself gives water, he is the water of life, the gift of God.

Jesus as water of life doesn't downplay the daily efforts of women to find enough drinking water. This Samaritan woman was busy doing her daily work. This ordinary water does not stand in opposition to the water of eternal life; both are in the scope of one another.

the woman at the well, nowadays

Worldwide, we see that mainly women share the burden of providing clean water and good food for their families. Due to pollution, desiccation and/or the privatising of water companies, clean drinking water has become for more and more people hard to obtain. Churches in sub-Saharan regions started a campaign to protect the Zambesi basin that supplies 30 million people (animals and plants not included) with drinking water because it has, through mining activities, become more and more contaminated. A pioneer in this struggle was Reverend Kuzipa Nalwamba: 'Women can bring new energy, insights, and a new basis for harnessing water resources in the region in the quest for dignity, peace and just relationships among people and the rest of God's creation.'

questions

1. Do you agree that the ecological crisis is a spiritual crisis and that we have to change our ways of thinking and believing?
2. Did you hear something new about the biblical creation stories that inspires you?
3. What form does ecological repentance takes for you and for your organisation?