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Deep Relationality

Living in Communion

The original title of this talk is supposed to be “*Deep Relationality and a New Earth*” which was to be presented by Sr. Iliia Delio, OSF. Since she was not available at that time due to the pandemic, I was asked to be her substitute. I accepted it because I was told to just focus on my own experience related to ecological spirituality.

I decided to retain the first part of the title: “deep relationality” and add “living in communion” – my own understanding of what relationality connotes. My presentation will focus on the spirituality of communion – the basis for ecological spirituality - which I have tried to live in my own life. This presentation has two parts.

1. The theological perspective: Universal Communion as promoted in *Laudato Si’*
2. My experience of living in communion

A. Universal Communion: *Laudato Si’* Perspective

Everything is interconnected. Everything is interrelated. This applies from sub-atomic level up to the entire cosmos including the biological, the eco-system and society. We all live within a web of relationships. The indigenous peoples, the mystics and scientists know this. This is the what Pope Francis echoes in *Laudato Si’*. This is at the heart of integral ecology. What is the theological basis for this? It is the theology of universal communion. According to Pope Francis: “Human life is grounded in three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: with God, with our neighbor and with the earth itself” (LS 66). In other words, human beings are created for communion, with God, with one another and with the rest of creation/earth:

“As part of the universe, called into being by one Father, all of us are linked by unseen bonds and together form a kind of universal family, a sublime communion which fills us with a sacred, affectionate and humble respect.” (89)

This is not to put all living beings on the same level nor deprive human beings of their unique worth and the tremendous responsibility that it entails. (90)

“A sense of deep communion with the rest of nature cannot be real if our hearts lack tenderness, compassion and concern for our fellow human beings.” (91)

“When our hearts are authentically open to universal communion, this sense of fraternity excludes nothing and no one.” (92)

The capacity for communion with others is based on the teaching that “every man and woman is created out of love and made in God’s image and likeness (Gen 1:26) which shows the immense dignity of each person, capable of self-knowledge, self-possession and of freely giving himself and entering into communion with other persons.” (CCC 357, LS 65).

What communion exactly means is not fully explicated in the document. So as an excursus let us briefly explore its meaning. The Latin equivalent is *communio* which is a translation of the Greek word *koinonia* which connotes having something in common, being connected by a common bond, union, solidarity, fellowship, kinship, fraternity, community, partnership, sharing, participation. Among Greeks, it is often associated with friendship: “friends are of one heart and mind and they share everything in common” (Nicomachean Ethics, Acts of the Apostles).

From an ecclesiological perspective, communion emerged as the earliest model of the Church (Acts 2:42-47, 4:32-35) – fellowship of believers, communion of faith, table-fellowship, communion of goods. This was later eclipsed by the institutional model of the Church although its spirit was preserved in religious life through the centuries. This was retrieved in Vatican II especially in *Lumen Gentium* which became the dominant ecclesiology connected with the People of God. “the Church is a people made one by the unity of the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit.” Ecclesial communion is, therefore, the reflection of Trinitarian communion. Theologians would later emphasize communion in Trinitarian discourse - perichoretic communion of the Three Divine Persons (Leonardo Boff).

In the document on ecumenism – *Ut Unum Sint* – the restoration of full communion is the goal of ecumenical dialogue. In *Vita Consecrata*, St. John Paul II applied communion as a perspective for understanding consecrated life. In *Familiaris Consortio*, he also views its realization in the family which is the domestic church.

The theme of communion has often been limited to ecclesiology. What is significant in *Laudato Si'* is that Pope Francis views communion from a universal perspective - universal communion – which includes communion with God, among all human beings and with all creation. This was the vision of St. Francis of Assisi. The ultimate foundation of this vision of interrelatedness of all things is the Triune God who creates all things: “The divine Persons are subsistent relations, and the world, created according to the divine model, is a web of relationships.” (240). This understanding that all creation reflects God’s triune and relational nature gives rise to a way of perceiving the world that is attentive to interconnection.

From this perspective, sin is regarded as the rupture of the three-fold communion which God has intended from the beginning:

“These three vital relationships have been broken, both outwardly and within us. This

rupture is sin... The harmony between the Creator, humanity and creation as a whole was disrupted by our presuming to take the place of God and refusing to acknowledge our creaturely limitations. This in turn distorted the mandate to “have dominion” over the earth. As a result, the originally harmonious relationship between human beings and nature became conflictual (cf. Gen 3:17-19). (The harmony which St. Francis of Assisi experienced with all creatures was seen as a healing of that rupture). Sin is manifest in all its destructive power in wars, the various forms of violence and abuse, the abandonment of the most vulnerable and attacks of nature.” (66)



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From the theology of universal communion flows the vision of *integral ecology* which has *three levels* of application:

1. *An understanding that interconnection is the essence of reality*
2. *As a way of seeing that can perceive interconnections among humans and the rest of creation*
3. *As a moral principle for acting in harmony with them.*

Integral ecology is the foundation of Pope Francis’ analysis of the ecological crises we

face and the basis for his proposals about how to respond to it.

Pope Francis proposes a Christian Spirituality that embraces “a prophetic and contemplative lifestyle, one capable of deep enjoyment free of the obsession with consumption.” (LS 222) This spirituality is accompanied by ecological conversion which includes “a loving awareness that we are not disconnected from the rest of creatures, but joined in a splendid universal communion.” (LS 220). This means a lifestyle that includes living in communion with one another and with creation:

“Care for nature is part of a lifestyle which includes the capacity for living together in communion. Jesus reminded us that we have God as our common Father and that makes us brothers and sisters. Fraternal love can only be gratuitous... This same gratuitousness inspires us to love and accept the wind, the sun and the clouds, even though we cannot control them. In this sense, we can speak of a “universal fraternity.” (LS 228)

Living in communion with one another which includes collaboration and community action can become an intense spiritual experience:

“By organizations which work to promote the common good and to defend the environment. Around these community actions, relationships develop or are recovered and a new social fabric emerges... These actions cultivate a shared identity, with a story which can be remembered and handed on. In this way, the world, and the quality of life of the poorest, are cared for, with a sense of solidarity which is at the same time aware that we live in a common home which God has entrusted to us. These community actions, when they express self-giving love, can also become intense spiritual experiences.” (LS 232)

Living in communion with God, with other human beings and with the rest of creation is a manifestation of human growth, maturity and sanctification. This is associated with spirituality – a spirituality of communion:

“The human person grows more, matures more and is sanctified more to the extent that he or she enters into relationship, going out from themselves to live in communion with God, with

others and with all creatures. In this way, they make their own that Trinitarian dynamism which God imprinted in them when they were created. Everything is interconnected, and this invites us to develop a spirituality of that global solidarity which flows from the mystery of the Trinity” (240)

In *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis draws our attention to our communion with one another that is associated with fraternity and social friendship. He emphasizes that it is love that impels all to universal communion:

“Love also impels us towards universal communion. No one can mature or find fulfilment by withdrawing from others. By its very nature, love calls for growth in openness and the ability to accept others as part of a continuing adventure that makes every periphery converge in a greater sense of mutual belonging.” (FT 95)

B. Living in Communion: Personal Experience

Throughout my life, especially the last four decades, I have been living the spirituality of communion – communion with others, with nature and with God. My understanding and lived-experience of ecological spirituality is an integral part of this three-fold communion.

Communion with others: Experience of Fraternity and Social Friendship

My first experience of communion has been within the family – with my parents, brothers and sisters, nephews and nieces. Through the years we have managed to maintain close relationships, mutual sharing and support for one another.

For over forty years as a Redemptorist, I have experienced communion within my religious congregation and the communities that I was assigned to. We live together, we eat together, we pray together and we carry out our missionary and apostolic work as a community. We practice communion of goods – we share our resources and gifts. We hold everything in common. We regard each other as brothers – confreres – and strive to live gospel friendship. We care for one

another, we support each other. I experience this sense of belonging and communion not only in the local Redemptorist community but in our province and other communities where I have been to – in the Manila, the US, Brazil and here in Rome.

As an apostolic missionary community dedicated to preaching the Gospel to the poor, closeness and friendship with those we work with and to those whom we are sent is an integral dimension of our life and mission. Even as a seminarian, part of my formation was to work and live among the poor in urban and rural areas. After ordination I was a member of the Redemptorist mission team, engaged in evangelization and formation of Basic Ecclesial Communities in remote rural areas and city parishes all over Mindanao. It was during these times that I experienced close relationship and friendship with the members of the mission team – religious and lay missionaries, and also among the people we lived and work with – especially the poor. When I was assigned in Davao after finishing my graduate studies in Berkeley and Rome, I was not only involved in teaching but also in pastoral ministry – as parish vicar and later as parish administrator. During weekends I was involved in evangelization and formation of BECs within our parish together with my theology students and pastoral workers. I was close to our parishioners and promoted communion among them.

I was also involved in interreligious dialogue and engaged in a dialogue of life and faith with Muslim leaders. I developed friendship among them and their families as we worked together for justice, peace and harmony. Being a member of the Imam, Priests and Pastors Forum, I also had interaction with Protestant ministers and collaborated with them. Thus, my experience of communion continued to expand beyond the borders of the Church.

During my sixteen years in Davao, I was also involved in human rights advocacy as a spokesperson of the Coalition Against Summary execution that documented and denounced extrajudicial killings carried out by Mayor Duterte's death squad. I developed

friendship with my fellow human rights activists and also some of the families of the victims of the killings. I also worked closely with the then archbishop and fellow priests in opposing these killings and in assisting the Commission of Human Rights and the Human Rights Watch.

After my assignment in Davao, I worked as executive secretary of the Committee on Basic Ecclesial Communities of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines. I continued to promote communion among BECs all over the country while collaborating with diocesan BEC promoters throughout the Philippines. I also continued collaborating with human rights activists opposing extrajudicial killings all over the country. Because of this I was on the hit list of the president's death squad.

Through the years, I also experienced deep friendship with lay people and religious outside my community and my ministry.

Communion with Nature

I feel most alive in the midst of nature – when I am in communion with nature. It is very difficult for me to live in the city amidst tall buildings, working in an office, sitting all day behind a desk in front of a computer which I find boring and depressing. I love climbing mountains, and walking through the forest and the fields. Gazing at the ocean from the beach, and swimming in the sea and river is very relaxing and mystifying. And so is diving underwater and communing with the fish in the colorful coral reefs.

There is a place that I consider my sacred space – Busay. It is on top of a mountain overlooking the city of Cebu, with a forest at the back. Since I was a newly-ordained priest in 1981 and through the past forty years this is where I usually spend time as a hermit – one month each year and five months during my two sabbatical years. In 1989 I built a bamboo hermitage where I could stay for several months since I was asked to go for graduate studies. This was destroyed by a typhoon when I was in Berkeley. So, when I came back later, I just stayed in a room at our rest-house which I converted as my hermitage. This is

where I lived intermittently in solitude, silence and reflection. This is where I have written my books, articles and poems. This is where I used to train for the marathons and my long-distance advocacies. I always feel recharged living here. After staying here, I find myself energized and ready to resume my missionary and pastoral work. This has kept me from burning out throughout these years. I promised myself that this is where I will spend the remaining years of my life.

In April 2018, after almost four decades in active ministry, I started living as a full-time hermit and began constructing a stone hermitage but this was cut short when I was sent on exile due to the assassination attempt against me by a death squad sent by the angry despot. I hope to go back there someday soon and resume my eremitical life.



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Looking back at those years, I realize that my love for the environment made me aware of the ecological destruction that was happening around me. Rivers were turning brown or drying up. The forests were disappearing. Even the colorful coral reefs that I used to see while scuba diving was turning white or were bleaching. The climate was changing. I wrote this poem over thirty years ago:

Ecological Haikus

*The sowing of seeds
on a parched and barren land,
a harvest of tears.*

*High yield variety,
fertilizers and pesticides,
requiem for the soil.*

*Gone are the forests,
so are their inhabitants,
soon all of us too.*

*The springs have dried up,
the rivers look like highways,
and soon the desert.*

*A darkening sky
over a barren landscape,
and soon the deluge.*

*The human design:
to construct a paradise
earth must be destroyed.*

I first became concerned about the environment when our mission team was assigned in San Fernando, Bukidnon in 1987. It was there that I heard the cry of the poor and the cry of the earth. Instead of simply evangelizing the Basic Ecclesial Communities, we made them aware of the ecological crisis and helped mobilize them against the logging companies. We were able to pressure the President of the Philippines – Corazon Aquino - to stop logging in the whole province. Eventually, logging was banned in the entire country. I wrote a poem that tells the story of the nonviolent struggle to protect the forest:

The Epic of San Fernando

We are poor peasants, living in small Christian communities in a remote valley of San Fernando, Bukidnon.

We have lived amidst violence -- the violence of poverty, of a guerrilla war, of the destruction of our environment, and the violence of the military. But we have walked the way of peace -- the way of the cross, and have experienced its liberating power. This is our story.

*There was a time when the mountains were green
and the river was blue.
The heavy rains did not flood our farms. Nor did
the long hot summer parch the land.
That was before the logging companies came.
They were owned by the politicians and protected
by soldiers.
We watched helplessly as the trucks passed by
carrying away the logs to be shipped to foreign
lands.
We signed petitions asking the government
to stop the loggers from turning our land into a
desert and our river into a highway.
But we never got any response.*

*Then the Redemptorist Mission Team came.
Priests, brothers and lay missionaries.
They lived among us and worked with us to build
Christian communities.
In our nipa huts late at night, and in our bamboo
chapels on Sundays we came together to listen to
the Word and to listen to each other's words.
We realized that to be true Christians it was not
enough to worship and to read the Bible.
We have to care for others and care for the earth.
We have to defend the forest -- which is our home,
the home of our neighbors -- Lumads and
Subanon, the home of the birds, the animals and
the wild plants.
We heard that the guerrillas -- who called
themselves the people's army wanted to help us
with their guns.
But we preferred to struggle in our own way -- the
way of the cross.
We were prepared to give up our life
but we would never take the life of another.
The day came when we gathered on the road
where the logging trucks passed.
There were several hundred of us -- men, women,
children and old people.
We barricaded the road with our bodies
and the logging trucks could no longer pass.*



Redemptorist Mission Team

*It was like a fiesta. We sang and danced,
we shared our food with one another and with the
loggers who were stranded.
It was a real communion. The priests, the
brothers, sisters and lay missionaries were with
us.
Even the Bishop came one night to pray with us.
They listened to us when we shared with them our
stories and our reflections on the Word of God
and on the unfolding event.
It was our turn to proclaim and give witness to the
Gospel.*

*Those who did not join us taunted us. They said
that we will never succeed.
We were poor, powerless and few and we were up
against rich businessmen and powerful politicians
who were protected by the military
and who could bribe the corrupt judges.*

*On the thirteenth day in the barricade while
celebrating the Eucharist with our parish priest
a truckload of constabulary soldiers came with
truncheons and shields.
They were ordered by a judge to disperse us. They
beat us without mercy.
They did not spare the old people and the
pregnant women.
They even beat the statue of the Sacred Heart of
Jesus.
We did not resist them. We turned the other cheek.
While they kept on beating us, we sang the "Our
Father" with tears in our eyes.
When they brought our parish priest to the camp
we also went with him.
We told the soldiers that if they will imprison him
they will also have to imprison all of us. They
finally told all of us to go home with our priest.
We went back to the side of the road that we used
to barricade and watched helplessly as the
logging trucks passed by.*

*We prayed and cried. We were defeated. It was
our Good Friday.
The sky darkened and the heavens wept with us
unceasingly.
It rained day and night for a couple of weeks.
And the river rose and the overflowing waters
dashed against the bridge
where all the logging trucks pass. And the bridge
collapsed.
And the road leading up to the logging camp was
blocked by a landslide.
The logging operations were stopped. Nature
continued the barricade for us.*

When we gathered the following night to pray on the side of the road where the logging trucks used to pass we all praised and thanked God who never abandoned us.

Meanwhile, the newspapers, the TV and radio began to report our story. Suddenly the conscience of many all over the country was awakened. They realized that our problem was also their problem. Many began to show their support. And there were even others in different parts of the country who followed our example. Our voice was beginning to be heard and finally, the President of the Philippines ordered a stop to the logging operations in San Fernando.

When we heard the good news our tears of sorrow became tears of joy. Our suffering had not been in vain. We thanked God by celebrating the Eucharist and by having an instant fiesta. It was our Easter Sunday. A few months later, a pastoral letter of the Bishops' Conference was read in all the Catholic churches and chapels all over the archipelago. It spoke about the ecological crisis in our country. And it mentioned the struggle of the people of San Fernando as a sign of hope and as an example for all. We could not believe that we in our insignificance and powerlessness can make a difference. Our story and our struggle should have ended then. But it did not. One year later we discovered that while the logging had stopped in San Fernando it continued in the neighboring mountains. We realized that even if it happened in other places we would be affected because we were all connected.

And so, we found ourselves once again in the barricade far away from home -- in the provincial capital. This time we were more numerous because the people from the neighboring areas joined us. We wanted the logging to be stopped in the entire province of Bukidnon. At first, we pitched our tents outside the office of the Department of Natural Resources. They just ignored us. And on the fifth day we transferred to the checkpoint in the national highway where all the logging trucks stop for inspection.

We took over the place and set up a human barricade. And all the logging trucks could no longer get through. The soldiers came and they could not disperse us.

Once again, the newspapers, radio and TV reported our story. Finally, the Secretary of the Department of Energy and Natural Resources heeded our request for a dialogue. He came riding on a helicopter to meet with us. After listening to us he granted most of our demands. He told us the logging in the neighboring mountains and towns would be stopped. He asked us to help in the greening of the brown mountains, and to help guard the forest. We went home rejoicing and thanking God once again for not abandoning us. The Eucharist became a victory celebration.

Now the logging companies have disappeared from San Fernando and from the neighboring mountains of Bukidnon. The trees that we have planted are growing. When our children grow up they will see green mountains and they can swim and fish in the blue river without fear. The heavy rains will not flood their farms. Nor the long hot summers parch the land. They will remember us for what we did for them. And they will remember the wonderful things God has done for us.

Since my experience in San Fernando Bukidnon, I have become committed to the care for our common home. I helped promote reforestation programs and organic farming/sustainable agriculture in the Basic Ecclesial Communities. When I was in Davao, I supported the campaign against aerial spraying of banana plantations. I also supported the campaign against the construction of coal-fired powerplant. I protested against mining. I combined my love for biking and running with my advocacies. In 2006 I biked for life and peace around Mindanao (2,000 km), in 2008 around the Philippines (2008). In 2010, I run-walked for Peace and the Environment across Mindanao (400 km) and across the Philippines in 2011 (2,000 km). I also did a climate ride from

Manila to Mindanao in 2014 (1,600 km) and visited the areas hit by the super-typhoons (e.g. Tacloban which was hit by typhoon Yolanda/Haiyan). I invited local bikers or runners to join me for a few hours. I integrated my environmental advocacy with my peace and human rights advocacy. In the parishes where I stayed for the night, I usually celebrated the Eucharist and preached about the Gospel of life, peace and creation – urging people to work for justice, peace and the integrity of creation. Most of these events were often magnified through social media and the mass media.

Biking, running and walking have become part of my day-to-day life. I do this not just for my advocacies, but also for health, adventure and to reduce my carbon footprint. I do not own a car and avoid traveling on fossil-fuelled mode of transportation as much as possible. I avoid the use of plastic. I practice waste segregation. I also thrive on one-meal a day (intermittent fasting) and a primarily plant-based diet although I still eat fish and eggs. I am aware that meat-consumption is one of biggest contributor to global warming. All these are concrete expression of my efforts to green living.

Communion with God

To be in direct communion with God is very difficult especially if you are not a mystic. How can I relate deeply and intimately with someone that I cannot see, touch or hear? It is God's distance or absence that I usually feel. I have to make a leap of faith. Of course, I believe the Triune God is present in the sacraments – especially the Holy Eucharist. I believe that God speaks to me through the Sacred Scriptures.

There are rare moments while praying and meditating that I can feel the Divine Presence. However, it is not inside the church or chapel that I have sensed deeply God's presence. It is usually in my loving encounter with people and my friendship and collaboration with them that I feel this presence. In struggling with others for peace, justice and the environment I feel God's presence recalling the words of Pope Francis: "These

community actions, when they express self-giving love, can also become intense spiritual experiences." (LS 232)." It is the care that I receive and give that God's presence becomes evident. It is the faith of those around me that strengthens my faith. To be in intimate communion with others is to be in communion with God. Communion with God is often mediated through other persons.

Most of my peak moments or religious experience have often been on top of the mountain, in the middle of the forest or while gazing at the moon and the stars. This is one of the reasons why I regularly go up to my sacred space on top of the mountain surrounded by trees and spend time as a hermit. This why I have gone up Mt. Apo, the highest mountain in the Philippines, seven times. There is something sacred about the mountain: the silence, the feeling of being alone with nature -- the trees, the flowers, the wind, the elements. All these contribute to a sense of awe, a sense of awareness and closeness with the great Someone. I believe the mountain has a very important function in my life. It is the place of encounter with God and the self, the place to look at reality from a vantage point and to understand more fully the meaning and direction of my life.

Closeness with nature is indeed closeness with God. This is also the reason why I walked 800 km on the Camino de Santiago twice – the first time barefoot in 2010 and the second time on a pair of sandals in 2016. I have felt the Divine presence as I crossed the Pyrenees, walked across the desert-like Meseta and the forests in Galicia. It was on that forest when I could no longer walk due to shin-splint that I experienced a healing miracle. Here's an entry from my pilgrim diary:

"I was all alone. The pain became so unbearable that I stopped to rest and cried out to God to relieve me of the pain. In the middle of the forest, all alone by myself, as I prayed for healing, a cold energy flowed through my legs from the ground and the pain suddenly disappeared. I heard a silent voice within my mind, chiding me: "Do you still doubt?" I sensed the intimate presence of Someone, whose presence I have always longed to

feel. Tears flowed on my cheeks as I was filled with so much awe and reverence. All I could say was: "I believe... thank you."

So, I continued my barefoot walk on the sacred path, feeling close to the earth, the forest, to the millions of pilgrims who have trod this path before me and to the Creator. The agony was gone ... followed by the ecstasy. Although, I was alone, I felt I was never alone. I savoured the feeling."

I also felt the presence of the Divine while looking at the sky at night on the Camino. I wrote this brief entry in my pilgrim diary:

"I stayed up late last night, sitting in the veranda and gazing at the moon and the night-sky until midnight. I was filled with so much awe as I felt the intimate presence of Someone. My eyes were misty and tears flowed."

In the summer of 2020, while walking a thousand kilometers on the Via Francigena from the Grand St. Bernard Pass at the Swiss Alps to Rome, I wrote this entry in my pilgrim diary after walking down the mountain and going through a forest trail:

"Since today was supposed to be an easy and short day, I decided to start walking at 6:30 in the morning. It was cold, windy and foggy. As I made my descent and the sun came out, the cold and fog were gone. What a glorious sight before me - a panoramic view of the mountains and hills. Filled with awe, I broke into song: "Though the mountains may fall and the hills turn to dust yet the love of the Lord will stand!" Much later as I was walking in a mini-forest trail I had an overwhelming feeling which made my eyes misty. It came from the awareness that I was walking amidst the divine presence. Creation - the trees, flowers, the hills, the mountains and the ground I was walking on proclaim the unseen presence of the loving creator who walks with me. I am reminded that the sacred is present not only at the end of my journey - the destination. I encounter the sacred along the way - in the beauty of creation, in people and deep within myself. The path I am walking which was trod by pilgrims through the centuries is a sacred path."

Closeness to nature makes me feel the Divine presence. An encounter with nature is an

encounter with God because God is somehow present in all things. Along the way, during my pilgrim journey, walking long-distances across the Camino de Santiago, the Via Francigena and across the Philippines, I sensed the Divine presence amidst nature and in my encounter with fellow pilgrims. In living as a hermit on top of the mountain and near a forest, I also experience a sense of the sacred. This does not mean living in total isolation as I still remain a member of the local Redemptorist community and come down once a month to join community recollections and festive celebrations. Close friends and family members sometime pay me a visit.

Thus, as far as I am concerned, communion with God is often mediated by my communion with others and with nature. This is what it means to live in communion. This is what deep relationality means for me. Communion sums up the spirituality of my life. A spirituality of communion is at the basis for ecological spirituality.

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