

# GLIMPSES OF EDEN

## A Quest for Ecological Conversion in East Africa

Oscar Momanyi

SHORTLY BEFORE the 26th Conference of the Parties (CoP) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, Hannah Malcolm wrote a thought-provoking article in *The Tablet* entitled ‘Good Grief’. It was a lamentation for a world that may well be past saving. Malcolm wrote about the growing reports of grief, anxiety and traumatic stress that have arisen from the existential threat of climate breakdown and ecological destruction. She argued that the human family needs to use the biblical notion of lamentation to mourn what is going on without falling into despair, and to resolve to live humbly in the current ecological crisis as they try to find solutions: ‘It is in lament that we might finally start to speak honestly about the destruction before us’.<sup>1</sup> We need to develop habits of the heart that will enable us to mourn the destruction of the planet and map out a spiritual path—one that comes out of our converted hearts moved by ‘good grief’ and that can help us to restore the Earth. Our spiritual resources have a lot to offer in this regard.

The publication by Pope Francis of his encyclical *Laudato si’* in 2015 increased the impetus for communities to work on implementing initiatives promoting ‘care for our common home’. In *Laudato si’*, Pope Francis noted that we are faced not with two separate crises—one environmental and the other social—but rather with one complex crisis which is both environmental and social. Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded and at the same time protecting nature. To that end, Pope Francis invites all people of good will to participate in an ‘ecological

<sup>1</sup> Hannah Malcolm, ‘Good Grief: How to Live in a Collapsing World’, *The Tablet*, 275/9424 (21 October 2021), 5.

conversion', a spiritual way of being that can enable us to see and tackle the ecological crisis with a renewed spiritual attitude that includes Malcolm's 'good grief'.<sup>2</sup>

Today, much still needs to be done to realise the Pope's vision. *Laudate Deum*, an update and extension to *Laudato si'*, which Pope Francis published in October 2023, demonstrates this. Nevertheless, action is being taken, often driven by spirituality, that goes unreported or unshared. I argue that there is an urgent need to communicate more success stories shaped by the spirituality of *Laudato si'*. As a result of such stories, people will find more hope and enthusiasm as they face the reality of the climate catastrophe in the awareness that we all confront these problems together, as a human family. That enthusiasm will help us to be imaginative and creative in the quest to alleviate them.

I would like to reflect on my own experience of working to promote the care of our common home in East Africa and witnessing others doing so. In recent years the region has experienced drought and flooding on a scale never seen before; but there is, nevertheless, still hope that we can avert such situations in the future.<sup>3</sup> People of good will, spurred by Malcolm's 'good grief' for the earth and by their faith and spirituality, are capable of bringing healing to the ecological catastrophe we face. I have witnessed ecological conversion taking place in my heart and the hearts of others as we worked together. This conversion is nonetheless an ongoing, even a lifetime, task. Hence, there is a need for continual reflection on what we are doing as a human family in order to develop new impetus and insights that can remotivate us to protect our common home.

My guiding thread is the spirituality of St Ignatius which is outlined in his *Spiritual Exercises*. It is a world-affirming spirituality that seeks to find God in all things; God's presence can be gleaned from all human experiences. This connects well with the integral ecology and spirituality that Pope Francis envisions in *Laudato si'*, in which everything is interconnected: our relations to one another, the environment and God belong to the same movement.

I have lived in different social contexts in East Africa while collaborating with others in the care of our common home. I will reflect

<sup>2</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato si'*, nn. 216–221.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Sara Kapan, 'Climate Change Caused Catastrophic East Africa Drought, Scientists Say', *The Washington Post* (27 April 2023).

on these initiatives and endeavour to show how spirituality, including Ignatian spirituality, is embedded in them. A deeper appreciation of the spirituality underlying these enterprises will help popularise such initiatives and make them a priority for the Church in East Africa and other parts of the world.

### ***Climate Change and Conflict in the Bahr el Ghazal***

Let me take the example of the Bahr el Ghazal region of South Sudan. This country usually gets negative publicity in the mainstream media that focuses on violence and deprivation: the news from there is generally about civil war or the dire situation in refugee camps. But that is just one story, and it is dangerous to have only a single story, since every narrative has another side that needs to be acknowledged. The ‘single story’—as described by the Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie—deprives South Sudan and other African countries of good narratives that remain untold.<sup>4</sup>

A few years ago, I worked in the town of Wau, which is in the west of the Bahr el Ghazal. Bahr el Ghazal can loosely be translated from Arabic as ‘sea of gazelles’, reflecting the abundance of the region’s wildlife. Situated on the fringes of the Jur and Agok rivers, which form



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*View of the River Jur, Bahr el Ghazal*

<sup>4</sup> ‘The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.’ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, ‘The Danger of a Single Story’, *TedGlobal* (July 2009), at [https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\\_ngozi\\_adichie\\_the\\_danger\\_of\\_a\\_single\\_story/transcript](https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story/transcript), accessed 2 March 2025.

part of the greater Nile river basin, Wau is covered by green vegetation, especially during the rainy season. Even though the region experiences high temperatures throughout the year, it is rich in trees, most of them mango trees. The forests around the town contribute immensely to its breathtaking views. In addition, tropical grass flourishes during the rainy season and grows to a height of up to two metres. The fauna is equally interesting: there are birds, such as partridges and kingfishers, various species of lizard, different types of insects, hedgehogs and several species of snake, among others.

The local people in Wau are the Balanda, the Luo (commonly known as the Jur) and the Dinka. While the Balanda are mainly agricultural folk, the Jur and the Dinka are nomadic cattle-keepers who have made their living out of animal husbandry for thousands of years. They graze their cattle along the Agok and Jur rivers throughout the year. For many years, the Dinka and Jur nomadic herdsman and the Balanda farmers have lived together in harmony and kept their ways of life. However, in the twenty-first century, the reality of global warming has started to take a toll on the Bahr el Ghazal. This has caused a lot of ethnic tension among these communities.

With the increasing temperatures there is evident pressure on the land around Wau and the Bahr el Ghazal in general. The major source of energy is wood from the forests. On a normal day, one can see many charcoal-burners emerging from the forests near Wau, carrying loads of charcoal to sell in the main market, Souk Jou. The beautiful forests of Wau and other parts of the Bahr el Ghazal are in danger from excessive charcoal production. Moreover, incidents of cattle-keepers grazing their animals on the crops of the agriculturalists are also on the increase. The tension between the cattle keepers and the agriculturalists over land has sometimes led to deadly interethnic clashes.

The cattle themselves occasionally put too much pressure on the land and overgrazing leaves it bare. The topsoil is blown away when the mighty yearly winds (*hubbub*) arrive from the north. To make matters worse, during the dry season many farmers burn their land to fertilise it. This burning sometimes creates forest fires that destroy the flora, as well as numerous homes and property. The Sahara Desert, which is not too far away, seems to be moving closer and closer to beautiful Wau because of deforestation and improper land use.

The conflict between herders and farmers in the Bahr el Ghazal is both ecological and social: there is a need to address it in order to

achieve lasting peace. Tackling environmental degradation and educating the people on ways of sharing natural resources can go a long way to help resolve the conflicts that keep erupting almost yearly.

### *Spirituality and Education*

Some spiritual aspects of the customs of the Dinka, Jur and Balanda can help heal the ecological crisis. For instance, totems connect human beings with nature in the cosmologies of all three cultures. These are revered animals, plants and even rocks especially associated with the clans of many ethnic groups in certain parts of Africa. Totems are considered to be inhabited by ancestral spirits and have taboos associated with them.<sup>5</sup> In Dinka, Jur and Balanda cosmologies one does not harm totems.

Totemism can be one way of helping to protect the animals and plants of the Bahr el Ghazal from being indiscriminately destroyed. The totemic worldview is one of reverence and protection of creation. People in such a context believe that hunting, harming or eating one's totem could bring misfortune, and hence the members of these communities are required to protect their totems from any danger.<sup>6</sup> This inherent custom of deep cosmic reverence for creation and respect for life seems to be disappearing with the coming of modernisation in the Bahr el Ghazal and elsewhere in Africa.

The Dinka, Jur and Balanda peoples can be re-educated about the culture of reverence for their own totems and those of others as a way to protect the environment and to practise a general care and valuing of creation. The inhabitants of the Bahr el Ghazal should not allow modernisation to drive out sacred customs, which have an embedded spirituality. Other places in Africa may need help to rediscover such cosmic values embedded in their own cultures.

On another level, formal education in ecology can also offer a way out of the ecological crisis. At the Jesuit Loyola Secondary School in Wau, Jesuits are trying to educate their students about environmental ethics. They cover such practical issues as the importance of planting trees, keeping the environment clean, the value of keeping a modest number of cattle that can be sustained by the land and the dangers of burning fallow land. The general education the students receive puts

<sup>5</sup> See Laurenti Magesa, *What Is Not Sacred? African Spirituality* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2013), 37.

<sup>6</sup> For more details about totems among the Dinka and totemism in general in the Bahr el Ghazal see Ibrahim Bedri, 'More Notes on Padang Dinka', *Sudan Notes and Records* (1948). Also see Francis Mading Deng, *The Dinka of the Sudan* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Wiston, 1972).

them in a position to make intelligent choices about the environment. Most of them show a sense of responsibility and love for it after graduating from school. Moreover, the school is dependent on solar energy, a fact that motivates the students to begin reflecting on sustainable energy alternatives.

Using Ignatian spirituality as a tool that can help the conversion of hearts, Jesuits encourage students to practise ecological and cosmic awareness in their general educational life. These young men and women are part of the hope for saving the Bahr el Ghazal from further degradation. They are ambassadors for the care for our common home now and in the future. The Jesuits realised that such environmental education could also benefit the community around the school. Several times in the past few years, the school has organized environmental sensitisation activities which have been well attended by adults from the community.

#### *Climate-Smart Agriculture*

In addition to the environmental work at the Loyola Secondary School, the Multi-Education Jesuit Institute of South Sudan (MAJIS), which is situated in the town of Rumbek in the Lakes State of the greater Bahr el Ghazal, educates the local Dinka people about environmental issues and promotes 'climate-smart agriculture', which focuses on increased productivity, enhanced resilience and reduced carbon emissions.<sup>7</sup>

The Dinka of Rumbek keep cattle, just as the Dinka of Wau do. In the small village of Akol Jal, Jesuits have set up a farm on which local people learn proper animal and crop husbandry alongside the use of alternative sources of energy rather than relying exclusively on wood. Climate-smart agriculture is the main driving force here. Most of the beneficiaries of this project are women, who learn how to create kitchen gardens, a skill that is practical and easy to implement in their homesteads.<sup>8</sup> They also learn how to keep climate-resilient crops that show high productivity.

<sup>7</sup> 'Climate Smart Agriculture (CSA) is a set of farming methods designed to increase the resilience and productivity of land affected by climate change .... Climate Smart Agriculture isn't a solution to climate change. But it is a solution to many of the secondary and tertiary problems caused by climate shocks.' 'Climate Smart Agriculture: Back to Basics to Fight Climate Change and Hunger', *Concern WorldWide*, at <https://www.concern.org.uk/story/what-is-climate-smart-agriculture>, accessed 2 March 2025. And see Leslie Lipper and others, 'Climate-Smart Agriculture for Food Security', *Nature Climate Change*, 4 (December 2014), 1068.

<sup>8</sup> For details about the benefits of kitchen gardening see Shakur Pasha and others, 'Kitchen Gardening', *Just Agriculture*, 3/6 (February 2023).

Both MAJIS and the Jesuit Ecological Centre (JEC) in Rumbek emphasize the use of solar energy. The JEC trains local people in how to install and use solar energy in their households. The use of biogas is also encouraged by both organizations as an alternative source of energy. The production of biogas is possible in the Bahr el Ghazal, because of the availability of cattle excrement from the numerous herds found in the area.

### *Green Fuel*

Another inspirational story is that of Archbishop Paul Pitia Yugusuk of the Central Equatoria internal province of the Episcopal Church of South Sudan. Archbishop Yugusuk is focusing on the development of biodiesel stoves using water hyacinth from the banks of the Nile in Juba and along other stretches of the river's course. The invasive growth of water hyacinth is a problem on the Nile; it tends to clog parts of the river, obstructing transport and killing various sorts of aquatic life. Harvesting water hyacinth to produce biodiesel solves some of these problems and at the same time helps the residents of Juba and other areas along the Nile, who struggle to get the energy they need for cooking. This in turn will save forests from being destroyed to produce charcoal.

Archbishop Yugusuk saw an opportunity and so began this green fuel initiative. He had to learn what to do from a similar project on the shores of Lake Victoria in Kenya.<sup>9</sup> His project, which is still in its inception, will require considerable initial capital, but



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*Water hyacinth growing in the River Pibor in South Sudan*

<sup>9</sup> Fred Ouko, 'Kenyan Entrepreneur Turns Water Hyacinth Weed into Cooking Fuel', *Reuters* (21 July 2021), at <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/kenyan-entrepreneur-turns-water-hyacinth-weed-into-cooking-fuel-2021-07-27/>, accessed 1 October 2023.

its long-term positive impact on the environment inspires Archbishop Yagusuk to continue working for its realisation. He is an example of a man moved by his spirituality and faith to seek to make a difference for his community.

### ***Social Justice: The Jesuit Hakimani Centre***

Moving away from South Sudan, the Jesuit Hakimani Centre is a centre for social concern for the Jesuits in East Africa, based in Nairobi, Kenya. The centre focuses on a faith that does justice guided by the spirituality of St Ignatius. Hakimani is a combination of two Swahili words, *haki* and *amani*: *haki* means justice and *amani* means peace. The Jesuit Hakimani Centre had its humble origins in the early 1990s in Kangemi, one of Nairobi's highly populated residential areas, where the Jesuits ran the St Joseph the Worker parish. It was officially launched as a centre for social justice in 2001. I had a privileged chance to work at the centre and to witness and participate first-hand in the work it does in the care of our planet.

Over the years the centre has carried out some stimulating ecological projects, all inspired by Pope Francis's call for ecological conversion as outlined in *Laudato si'*. Two of them, inspirational in terms of their success, offer encouragement to the ecological activities of the Church in East Africa and elsewhere.

#### *Smart Water Governance*

The first project was the Climate Smart Water Governance initiative, a flagship effort for climate resilience.<sup>10</sup> It focused on two arid and semi-arid counties in Kenya, Kilifi and Garissa, which are traversed by the Tana river. The major challenges faced in the two counties included the overuse of water by upstream counties for agriculture and the diminishing water quality owing to pollution. Additionally, the lack of proper legal frameworks to guide the sharing of water resources and conservation of water catchment areas, and the poor management of water catchment areas, were problems needing significant attention. There are persistent conflicts over water resources in both the upstream and downstream counties, especially during the annual dry season and

<sup>10</sup> This project was funded by the British government's Department for International Development under the Deepening Democracy Programme for accountable government. See 'Climate Smart Water Governance: Executive Summary' (11 September 2019), *Scofield*, at <https://scofieldassociates.co.ke/climate-smart-water-governance/>, accessed 2 March 2025.



times of drought. Sharing of water resources during dry seasons will help farmers and herders live harmoniously.

For three years, beginning in 2017, the Jesuit Hakimani Centre worked with local communities and the county governments of Kilifi and Garissa to improve access to clean and reliable water. One measure of success was the change in attitudes among the locals to their use of water. Instances of sustainable use and the sharing of scarce water resources in both upstream and downstream communities were cited by the beneficiaries. The centre also trained people in about 400 households across the two counties about the sustainable use of water. The project focused on how water scarcity affects women and children more than men, and how women can be empowered to be at the forefront in helping to improve water accessibility.

The other area of success was in advocacy. The centre was able to shape water policies debated at the county assemblies of the two counties by crafting a policy paper and policy briefs that guided the debates on water issues. Working with the members of the county assemblies the Jesuit Hakimani Centre helped these men and women pass legislation geared towards protecting water catchment areas and the sustainable use and sharing of water resources. The policy paper was titled the *Intercounty Shared Water Ecosystem Policy*.<sup>11</sup> It attempted to formulate a framework with the aim of responding to climate change in the utilisation, management, governance and conservation of shared water ecosystems in the Tana and Athi river basins. This project is an inspiration for other organizations and people of good will to begin such initiatives in other endangered water basins in East Africa.

### *Food Sovereignty*

The second success story is the Jesuit Hakimani Centre's Food Sovereignty for Marginal Communities project.<sup>12</sup> Through this project, the centre worked for ten years (2013–2023) to bolster the productive capacity of agriculture in the impoverished counties of Kitui, Kajiado and Isiolo in Kenya. They have taken an approach to food security which aims at influencing government policies and practices to reflect community

<sup>11</sup> *Intercounty Shared Water Ecosystem Policy* (Nairobi: Jesuit Hakimani Centre, 2020).

<sup>12</sup> The project was funded by the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development (CAFOD), seeking to empower marginal communities who face food insecurity. Sovereignty here implies the ability of these communities to produce food independently for themselves rather than rely on handouts.



voices and needs. The project focused on supporting smallholder farmers to practise more resilient and climate-adapted forms of farming similar to the ones advocated by the Jesuits in Rumbek; it too promotes the methods of climate-smart agriculture.

Over the years, the Jesuit Hakimani Centre has been a strong advocate for food sovereignty in the three counties and has also sought to facilitate community contributions to policy dialogue and to enable a ripple effect of community-owned initiatives. Finally, in light of the Ignatian way of reviewing the experience we encounter, the centre has endeavoured to evaluate the success of its own interventions in improving food security at the household level.

In practical terms, the project prioritised kitchen gardening as a way to improve food security in these communities: ‘a kitchen garden can supply up to half of all non-staple food needs’.<sup>13</sup> It has challenged rural households that predominantly practise nomadic animal husbandry to engage in kitchen gardening as well. Communities in Kitui, Kajiado and Isiolo are subject to erratic rainfall and frequent droughts that have affected their livestock-keeping. The practice of kitchen gardening has the potential to feed them all year round.

<sup>13</sup> ‘From Plot to Plate—a “Kitchen Garden” Story’, *Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations*, at <https://www.fao.org/gender/insights/insights-detail/From-plot-to-plate-a-kitchen-garden-story/en>, accessed 4 March 2025.

### ***Ecologically Friendly Spirituality: Mwangaza***

Moving on to another success story, Mwangaza Jesuit Spirituality Centre, situated on forty acres of land on the outskirts of the city of Nairobi, is a vibrant retreat house run by the Jesuits in East Africa. *Mwangaza* is a Swahili word meaning light, hence the centre is a symbol of light. The beauty of the place makes it a natural setting for retreats, a place where people seek inner light. Many species of plants and animals are found at Mwangaza, and the centre tries to champion an ecologically friendly spirituality.

Apart from offering traditional retreats, Mwangaza has among its programmes several intentional activities that aim at promoting care for our common home. The annual *Laudato si'* workshop is facilitated by Mwangaza in collaboration with a group of young men and women who are inspired by the spirituality of St Ignatius. They are known as the Catholic Youth Network for Environmental Sustainability in Africa, and they seek to disseminate the message of environmental protection to all parts of Africa.<sup>14</sup> It is particularly inspiring that their agenda is set by youth and run by youth—a beacon of hope for Africa.

In addition to these workshops, over the years Mwangaza has also offered several Saturday Days of Prayer or Days of Recollection based on the themes in *Laudato si'*, which are popular with local people. Over seventy people have participated in each event, which highlights how important environmental issues are for the Christians in Nairobi. All the retreats provided at Mwangaza endeavour to link spirituality to ecological issues and encourage retreatants to reflect on their contribution to the care of our common home.

In March 2022, Mwangaza was host to the African hub of the International Ignatian Ecospiritual Conference, which was organized by the Australian Jesuits.<sup>15</sup> The conference, which was partly a retreat, ran for five days. It highlighted that ecological collaboration at the continental level is possible and can bring meaningful change through dialogue and sharing of ideas. Conversations with people from different continents about what they are doing enriched the participants with ways to be ecologically literate. We can learn from other people far away from us and implement what we have learnt in our own contexts.

<sup>14</sup> See: <https://www.cynesa.org/>, accessed 4 March 2025.

<sup>15</sup> See <https://jesuit.org.au/international-ignatian-ecospiritual-conference-iiiec2022/>, accessed 4 March 2025.

For example the conference introduced the idea of *Laudato si'* clubs, which have been formed, often in schools and colleges, all over the world. This is something that the Mwangaza centre could explore.

As a result of Mwangaza's ecological awareness programmes, the Jesuits have teamed up with the Missionary Sisters of Our Lady of Africa to promote paper recycling, which is not yet an established industry in Kenya. The practice of burning waste paper, which increases carbon in the atmosphere, is rampant because there is no other better way to dispose of it. The sisters have a project for collecting waste paper to process and turn into bricks for construction.<sup>16</sup> These are then sold as a source of income for an orphanage run by the sisters. Such creative initiatives need to be encouraged.

Apart from its regular spirituality programmes, Mwangaza is also taking practical steps such as using solar power and engaging in sustainable farming. The solar project reduces both the cost of electricity to the centre and its carbon dioxide emissions. The farm produces vegetables and fruit for most of the year, using manure from the animals

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environment**

as compost. Mwangaza also raises bees, and their chicken farm produces meat, eggs, and manure for fertilizer. The farm provides a beautiful ecosystem in which people can pray with nature. Underlying the spirituality of ecological sustainability at Mwangaza is the fact that caring for the environment goes side by side with caring for spiritual lives. How people pray reflects the way they care for the environment. What motivates the ecological work at Mwangaza is St Ignatius' Contemplation to Attain Divine Love (Exx 231–237); one of the days of prayer on care for our common home was dedicated to the Contemplation to Attain Divine Love.

**Two Inspiring Examples**

I would like to conclude by highlighting the contribution of two people who are influenced by their spirituality and faith to care for the environment in a particularly dedicated and focused way. They embody the witness outlined in *Laudato si'* and *Laudate Deum*; I hope they will inspire others to emulate their simple yet edifying and effective ways of caring for the earth.

<sup>16</sup> For details of this paper recycling technology see Tefy Raelivololona, Mamiharijaona Ramarason and Chrysostome Raminosoa, 'Paper Recycling for the Making of Constructions Materials'. *MATEC Web of Conferences*, 307/01041 (2020).

*James Strzok*

Using his knowledge of geology, Jesuit Father James Strzok embarked on an experiment with geothermal power at Mwangaza. He discovered that the heat from extinct volcanoes is trapped beneath the well that supplies water to the centre, and this heat keeps the water at about thirty degrees Celsius all year round.<sup>17</sup> He went on to set up a geothermal system in the well, which heats the Mwangaza chapel during the cold season of July to August.

Strzok also pioneered the use of hydraform interlocking building blocks in the construction of the Ocer Campion Jesuit College in Gulu, Uganda, in 2006 after the end of the war between the government and the Lord's Resistance Army of Joseph Koni. There was great need for cheap and ecologically sustainable building materials in war-ravaged northern Uganda during the period of reconstruction. These building blocks are manufactured mainly from subsurface soil that is pressed hydraulically into blocks that interlock on all sides.<sup>18</sup> Hydraform blocks need less energy to produce than other local building bricks, which were made by baking them in wood fires, leading to deforestation in the area. 'Ocer' means 'resurrected' in the Acholi language; it is possible to see how this creative use of a natural resource helped to resurrect the hope of the people of northern Uganda in a school that is a symbol of hope.<sup>19</sup>

*Vincent Soreng*

The Jesuit brother Vincent Soreng, originally from Ranchi in India, has been an icon among the Jesuits of East Africa for over fifty years. Trained in agronomy by his novice master in Ranchi, he has spent his entire life caring for the environment. He received recognition from Pope Francis in 2016 for his dedication to ecological work.<sup>20</sup> One example among his many contributions to caring for the environment during an illustrious career will suffice here.

<sup>17</sup> James Strzok, 'Ready to Change the World? Start Here! What Are Jesuits Doing in East Africa?' *Journal of Jesuit Studies*, 3 (2016), 585.

<sup>18</sup> Strzok, 'Ready to Change the World?', 584. And see <https://www.hydraform.com/about-us/>, accessed 4 March 2025.

<sup>19</sup> The original Campion College was located in Prairie du Chien in the state of Wisconsin in the USA, and it was closed in 1975. Thirty years later, the alumni of Campion College, Prairie du Chien, raised money to build a new (resurrected or 'Ocer') Campion Jesuit College in Gulu.

<sup>20</sup> See 'East Africa—Br Vincent Soreng Honoured by Pope Francis for the Care of our Common Home', *Social Justice and Ecology Secretariat*, at <https://www.sjesjesuits.global/2019/04/19/east-africa-br-vincent-soreng-honoured-by-pope-francis-for-the-care-of-our-common-home/>, accessed 4 March 2025.

The city of Dodoma in central Tanzania is situated in a semi-arid area. When the Jesuits embarked on building St Peter Claver High School there in 2007, Soreng was part of the initial team sent to Dodoma to start the school. Upon his arrival, he pioneered a campaign of planting trees and promoting ecologically sustainable ways of growing crops. Together with Strzok, he began a project to purify used water for farming. All the water from the school buildings was channelled to a biodigester which purified it, and this water was used for irrigating the trees around the school. The two also encouraged the use of biogas from animal waste produced on the school farm for cooking. In the end, the two Jesuits set up an ecologically sustainable farm that turned a little desert into an oasis. The whole area of the school is now covered by a variety of trees and other plants.

Throughout Soreng's career as a Jesuit, he has always been fascinated by the earth and care for the environment. As a tribal Indian, a close connection with the earth is something that comes naturally to him. Soreng feels happy with what he has achieved in his life. In his mid-eighties he feels that he has completed his mission and is content with what God has given him. He says this with a big smile! He is happy above all because he has worked to make other people happy in their lives through his ecological activities.

He is glad that he has been accepted into every community he has been to, and that many people helped him in his work of caring for our common home. He has immense gratitude for what God has done in his life for the environment as a gift: his life is the embodiment of *Laudato si'*. He once proclaimed: 'I do not preach, I do not teach, I work', but his simple ordinary life is itself an example of preaching and teaching. Living and working in simplicity for the care of our common home is a powerful testimony to the people of God, just as St Francis of Assisi would affirm.

### **Reason to Hope**

All the above initiatives and testimonies give us reason to hope that the message of Pope Francis in *Laudato si'* is viable and can continue to spread in big and small ways in East Africa and throughout the world. Through such interventions, the environmental catastrophes that we witness in our region—droughts, floods, landslides, locust infestations—can be mitigated.

The Contemplation to Attain Love continues to call us to be grateful for who we are and what we have received in the gift of creation, and to be good custodians of these gifts. There are many other ecological initiatives taking place all over East Africa and elsewhere that should inspire us all to continue to care for the beautiful world God has given us.

The need for networking among faith communities is key to the agenda for ecological care. Here I have brought together some success stories and examples of collaboration and networking that can be tried in other contexts—but more needs to be done. The inaugural African Climate Summit took place in Nairobi in 2023.<sup>21</sup> The resolutions from the summit are ambitious and they raise the question: will Africa be a leading voice for climate justice and the care for our common home in the future? Given the real-life experiences I have described and other activities taking place across the continent, I can confidently answer the question in the affirmative.

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<sup>21</sup> See <https://africaclimatesummit.org/>, accessed 4 March 2025.