



## **The Church and Climate Change: A Contribution of The Vincentian in Ecological Situation**

**Michael Boutchi, C.M.**

**Damas Nzimenya, C.M.**

**Jean Baptiste Mandakoasy, C.M.**

**Joseph Upper, C.M.**

The International Vincentian Theologate in Enugu, Nigeria

[Friendlyfriendly976@gmail.com](mailto:friendlyfriendly976@gmail.com)

### **Abstract:**

The Church embodies the Kingdom of God on earth, prioritizing God's glory, human well-being, and the salvation of souls, which necessitates a healthy environment. Climate change poses severe threats to this mission, especially impacting the poor and vulnerable. Guided by Pope Francis's encyclical "Laudato Si," the Church and Vincentians advocate for integral ecology, emphasizing environmental stewardship as a moral imperative. The Vincentian response aligns with its mission to serve the marginalized, addressing environmental issues through initiatives like the Vincentian Family Homeless Alliance and the Vincentian-Grenadine Sustainable Development Plan. Case studies such as the 13 Houses Campaign and the Akamasoa Project in Madagascar showcase practical efforts to alleviate poverty while promoting sustainability. Collaborations with environmental and interfaith organizations, along with community engagement, strengthen these efforts. Despite challenges, the Congregation of the Mission remains committed to fostering a sustainable future, integrating environmental care as part of its service to humanity.

L'Église incarne le Royaume de Dieu sur terre, en donnant la priorité à la gloire de Dieu, au bien-être des hommes et au salut des âmes, ce qui nécessite un environnement sain. Le changement climatique fait peser de graves menaces sur cette mission, en particulier sur les pauvres et les personnes vulnérables. Guidés par l'encyclique « Laudato Si » du Pape François, l'Église et les Vincentiens plaident pour une écologie intégrale, mettant l'accent sur la gestion de l'environnement en tant qu'impératif moral. La réponse vincentienne s'aligne sur sa mission de servir les marginalisés, en abordant les questions environnementales par le biais d'initiatives telles que l'Alliance des familles vincentiennes sans-abri et le Plan de développement durable Vincentien-Grenadine. Des études de cas telles que la Campagne des 13 maisons et le Projet Akamasoa à Madagascar illustrent les efforts pratiques déployés pour réduire la pauvreté tout en promouvant la durabilité. Les collaborations avec des organisations environnementales et interconfessionnelles, ainsi que l'engagement communautaire, renforcent ces efforts. Malgré les défis, la Congrégation de la Mission reste engagée dans la promotion d'un avenir durable, en intégrant la protection de l'environnement dans le cadre de son service à l'humanité.

La Iglesia encarna el Reino de Dios en la tierra, dando prioridad a la gloria de Dios, el bienestar humano y la salvación de las almas, lo que requiere un medio ambiente sano. El cambio climático plantea graves amenazas a esta misión, que afectan especialmente a los pobres y vulnerables. Guiados por la encíclica «Laudato Si» del Papa Francisco, la Iglesia y los vicentinos abogan por



una ecología integral, haciendo hincapié en la administración del medio ambiente como un imperativo moral. La respuesta vicenciana se alinea con su misión de servir a los marginados, abordando cuestiones medioambientales a través de iniciativas como la Alianza de Familias Vicencianas sin Hogar y el Plan de Desarrollo Sostenible Vicenciano-Granadino. Estudios de casos como la Campaña de las 13 Casas y el Proyecto Akamasoa en Madagascar muestran los esfuerzos prácticos para aliviar la pobreza al tiempo que se promueve la sostenibilidad. La colaboración con organizaciones medioambientales e interreligiosas, junto con el compromiso de la comunidad, refuerzan estos esfuerzos. A pesar de los retos, la Congregación de la Misión sigue comprometida con el fomento de un futuro sostenible, integrando el cuidado del medio ambiente como parte de su servicio a la humanidad.

**Keywords:** Vincentian, Climate change, Akamasoa, Systemic change

## 1. Introduction

The Church is the most tangible, visible, and concrete representation of the *Basileia tou Theou* (Kingdom of God) on earth. It works for the glory of God, the well-being of people (as reflected in the Social Teaching of the Church), and the salvation of souls. These objectives cannot be achieved if the natural environment of humanity is compromised by adverse climatic changes. Today, more than ever, the world is challenged by climate behavior that seems to be reacting against humanity. The Church in general, and the Vincentians in particular, aim to contribute to building an ecological society where everyone feels at home and can benefit from the wonders of creation. For instance, Pope Francis, in his encyclical "Laudato Si," expresses deep concern about climate issues and their negative impact on people's lives. His statements and advice, if followed, can change people's attitudes towards the environment. He proposes integral ecology as a new paradigm of justice, emphasizing respect for our unique place as human beings and our relationship with our surroundings<sup>1</sup>. The encyclical also advocates for the improvement of the common good in our societies, stressing that this goal cannot be achieved if the ecological or climatic conditions are not favorable and healthy for all beings, especially humans. This is why the Pope wrote, "Human ecology is inseparable from the notion of the common good<sup>2</sup>."

Climate change, by destroying vegetation, soil, animals, and even humans, exacerbates poverty globally and particularly in Africa. A true Vincentian, committed to the charism handed down by Saint Vincent de Paul, which involves caring for the poor, cannot remain indifferent. This research will focus on several points: the Church's stance on climate change, the impact of climate change on society, the Vincentian response, case studies, communication with other organizations, and the challenges and opportunities. These aspects are not exhaustive but provide a framework for analyzing climate change.

## 2. The Church's Stance on Climate Change:

Global climate change is not about economic theory, political platforms, partisan advantage, or interest group pressures; it concerns the future of God's creation and the one human family. It involves protecting both the human and natural environments and

---

<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato Si* p.15

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p.156.

our stewardship of God's creation and responsibility to future generations. The Church insists that climate change is a grave moral issue that threatens our commitments: protecting human life, health, dignity, and security; exercising a preferential option for the poor; promoting the common good, which includes the climate; and living in solidarity with future generations<sup>3</sup>.

Climate change is also viewed through four guiding principles: prudence in the face of uncertainty, protecting the poor and vulnerable, working towards the common good, and promoting human solidarity.

1. *Prudence*: Responding to climate change is necessary based on significant scientific consensus, even if not fully certain. If the current course of action threatens humanity's well-being, prudence dictates taking mitigating or preventative measures.
2. *Protecting the Poor*: Focus on the needs of the poor, the weak, and the vulnerable in a debate often dominated by powerful interests. Inaction or inadequate responses to climate change will likely impose greater burdens on already impoverished peoples.
3. *Common Good*: Global climate is inherently part of the planetary commons. Environmental impacts, such as melting ice sheets, deforestation, and pollution, can affect distant areas. Responses to climate change should reflect our interdependence and collective responsibility for the future of our planet. Nations must balance their self-interest with the greater common good and contribute equitably to global solutions.
4. *Solidarity*: The common good requires solidarity with the poor, who often lack resources to face many problems, including potential climate change impacts. Our obligations to the human family extend across space and time, connecting us to the poor globally and to future generations.

### **3. The Vincentian Response to Climate Change**

#### **a. History and Mission of the CM Regarding Environmental Issues**

Since the inception of the Congregation, the key priority of its charism has been the commitment to serving the poor and marginalized. Consequently, the Congregation has oriented its charisms and core beliefs to not only promote the well-being of the poor—body, mind, and spirit—but also to ensure a holistic care that transcends personal needs and emphasizes the collective good. This broad approach to care extends to all other aspects of the Vincentian ministry, providing comfort to those in need and honoring God's creation as well. Hence, the focus on ecology today.

The application of the Vincentian charism to ecology stems from their commitment to following the teachings of Jesus, who exemplified love, compassion, and respect for all of God's creation. Our Constitutions and Statutes clearly state: "The whole

---

<sup>3</sup> BRUCE LIEBERMAN. *The Catholic Church and Climate Change*, february 14, 2012

purpose of the Congregation is to follow Christ evangelizing the poor<sup>4</sup>.” Jesus’ preferential option for the poor in all aspects continues to animate the Vincentian charism. Saint Vincent de Paul’s unquenchable love, compassion, and empathy for the poor led him to establish an inclusive charism that upholds the dignity of the poor, treating them as guests at our family tables rather than as beggars waiting for crumbs. Consequently, reflections that favor the welfare of the poor are held in high esteem and are integral to our ministries.

The Congregation’s modern-era focus on ecological issues can be traced to Pope Francis’s 2015 encyclical, "Laudato Si," which emphasizes the urgency of environmental stewardship. Recognizing that environmental exploitation often affects the most vulnerable communities, provoking poverty and injustice, the Vincentians have incorporated environmental advocacy and sustainable practices into their mission. They understand that caring for the environment addresses the root causes of poverty and injustice and is an act of charity towards future generations.

## **b. Some Vincentian Environmental Initiatives**

The Congregation of the Mission (CM) recognizes the importance of taking care of God’s creation. Thus, they undertake various initiatives to combat the impact of climate change and environmental destruction, including:

1. *The Vincentian Family Homeless Alliance (VFHA)*: The VFHA acknowledges the connection between environmental issues and homelessness. It addresses these by integrating sustainable practices into their housing solutions, raising awareness about environmental challenges among the homeless population, forming partnerships with environmental organizations, creating green spaces, and promoting healthy and responsible waste management. By considering the environmental impact of their programs, the VFHA aims to contribute to a more sustainable future for homeless individuals and the communities in which they reside.
2. *The Vincentian-Grenadine Scheme (also known as the Vincentian-Grenadine Sustainable Development Plan)*: This initiative addresses environmental issues through several key strategies:
  - *Climate Change Adaptation*: This scheme focuses on building early warning systems for extreme weather events, implementing coastal zone management strategies to protect against sea-level rise, and promoting sustainable agricultural practices that can withstand changing climatic conditions.
  - *Renewable Energy Promotion*: This strategy involves developing renewable energy sources to reduce reliance on fossil fuels and mitigate pollution. It includes building solar energy plants, wind energy plants, and geothermal energy facilities, and formulating policies for their integration.
  - *Biodiversity Conservation*: This scheme aims to preserve ecosystems, including forests, wetlands, and coastal areas.
  - *Sustainable Tourism*: This initiative seeks to develop the tourism sector in an environmentally friendly manner. It promotes responsible tourism

---

<sup>4</sup> Constitutions and Statutes of the congregation of the mission, no.1

practices, such as controlled waste policies, conserving water resources, and minimizing the impact on delicate ecosystems<sup>5</sup>.

#### **4. Case Studies: Examples of Specific Projects or Actions Undertaken by Vincentians in Response to Climate Change**

##### **a. 13 Houses Campaign: A Famvin Homeless Alliance Initiative**

The 13 Houses Campaign, an initiative of the Famvin Homeless Alliance, aims to improve and transform the lives of 10,000 homeless people around the world from 2018 onwards. The goal is to establish 13 Houses projects in each of the 156 countries where the Vincentian Family operates.

This initiative traces its roots to 1643 when Vincent de Paul received an endowment equivalent to one million dollars from Louis XIII for his Congregation's mission. Vincent used the funds to build 13 small houses near Saint-Lazare, the motherhouse of the Congregation of the Mission, to care for abandoned children. The ongoing costs were supported by the Ladies of Charity, while the Daughters of Charity cared for the children. Through this partnership, the Vincentian Family helped thousands of children who would have otherwise died on the streets.

The Vincentian partnership extended its aid beyond just children. It provided support to displaced people in the war zone of Alsace Lorraine, housed refugees fleeing the battle zone, and established the Name of Jesus Hospice in 1652 to shelter, clothe, feed, and train older people living on the streets or in slums of Paris. It also launched Les Petites Ecoles (the little schools), which brought literacy, numeracy, and education to the poor, enabling them to escape intergenerational poverty.

Inspired by Vincent's 13 Houses, the campaign responds to the contemporary global problem of homelessness. With nearly 1.2 billion people homeless, displaced, living in slums, or on the streets, the 13 Houses Campaign aims to address these issues globally, echoing Vincent's approach to tangible, compassionate action.

##### **b. Akamasoa-Madagascar Project**

"Akamasoa" is the result of the work carried out in Madagascar by Fr. Pedro Opeka, CM, since 1989. Officially recognized as a significant Vincentian project, Akamasoa addresses poverty and climate issues in Madagascar. The project benefits 25,000 people living in its villages, which include dispensaries, workplaces for adults, and schools for 13,000 children. Annually, 30,000 poor people receive food, medicine, and clothing, and to date, 3,000 new houses have been built.

Fr. Opeka, a spiritual son of St. Vincent de Paul, emphasized helping the poor where they live to "help them help themselves." Thus, Akamasoa, meaning "good friend," emerged as a city where inhabitants support themselves through work. Initially, people living in a landfill began producing bricks, pebbles, tiles, and gravel from a nearby granite quarry, selling these to construction companies to earn a wage and sustain their families. Today, Akamasoa is a thriving community demonstrating that collective effort and external support can transform lives.

Fr. Opeka describes Akamasoa as based on joy, brotherhood, work, and the happiness of children who once lived in inhuman conditions. Sunday Masses are communal celebrations of gratitude to God for His help. Fr. Opeka asserts that while there

---

<sup>5</sup> National Report: *St. Vincent and the Grenadines: Third International Conference on Small Island Developing State, Ministry of health wellness and the Environment*, July, 2013.

is no universal formula to aid the poor, gestures of love and compassion, adapted to different cultures and circumstances, always lead to the right path.

### **c. Homeless People's Federation Philippines (HPFP)**

In the Philippines, various branches of the Vincentian Family—the Congregation of the Mission, the Daughters of Charity, AIC, SSVP, and the Vincentian Marian Youth—collaborated in Payatas, a slum in Manila, to address local needs. After analyzing the community's reality, they started a holistic project to satisfy primary needs for those working in the enormous garbage dump.

A central element of this project is a savings program, coordinated by Fr. Norberto Carcellar, CM, which operates 24 hours a day. This initiative empowers the poor to become the main agents of their own development. From a simple savings and loan program in Payatas, the HPFP has evolved, mobilizing urban informal settlers and slum dwellers around shelter and land tenure issues.

In natural disasters, the Federation offers support to the poorest members. As the project grew, HPFP found partners among professionals, academicians, local governments, national agencies, international organizations, and multilateral institutions, creating a broader support system. This evolving social system consists of community networks implementing strategies to manage community resources.

### **d. AIC-Madagascar: To Be Transformed in Order to Transform**

AIC in Madagascar, a country where Vincent de Paul directed significant efforts, continues to keep his charism alive. Recently, AIC transformed from a few disjointed groups into an important national network, part of the international AIC.

Currently, there are thirteen groups of poor women working to alleviate poverty in their families and communities. Networking is a key strategy, allowing them to achieve goals that would be unattainable individually. Madagascar's internal network collaborates with the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity and receives support from international organizations like UNICEF. This support includes subsidies, didactic materials, and food. Recognized by UNICEF as a privileged partner, AIC-Madagascar volunteers have presented their experiences at international meetings, sharing their insights on child nutrition, maternal care, violence prevention, and responsible paternity.

AIC-Madagascar's projects demonstrate a clear commitment to eradicating poverty through listening, ongoing formation, empowerment, political action, and networking.

## **5. Collaboration of the CM with Other Organizations**

Partnerships and collaborative efforts between the Vincentians and other groups working on environmental issues are crucial for addressing complex environmental challenges. Collaborating with various organizations, both locally and globally, can enhance the effectiveness of the Vincentians' efforts to promote environmentally sustainable practices and social development. Some of these partnerships include:

- *Partnerships with Environmental Organizations:* Collaborating with environmental NGOs like Greenpeace, WWF, or local grassroots organizations can amplify the Vincentians' impact on environmental issues. These partnerships

can involve joint advocacy campaigns, community projects, and educational initiatives aimed at raising awareness and driving positive change<sup>6</sup>.

- *Interfaith Collaboration*: Engaging in interfaith partnerships with other religious groups working on environmental issues can foster a broader, inclusive approach to environmental stewardship. Joint efforts with organizations like Interfaith Power & Light or the Global Catholic Climate Movement can leverage diverse perspectives and resources for more comprehensive environmental solutions<sup>7</sup>.
- *Academic Partnerships*: Collaborating with universities and research institutions can facilitate knowledge sharing, capacity building, and innovative solutions to environmental challenges. Establishing partnerships with academia can lead to the development of research projects, policy recommendations, and educational programs that promote sustainable practices and environmental awareness<sup>8</sup>.
- *Community Engagement*: Partnering with local communities, indigenous groups, and environmental justice organizations is essential for grassroots mobilization and inclusive decision-making processes. By empowering communities to participate in environmental initiatives, the Vincentians can ensure that their efforts are responsive to local needs and priorities, leading to more sustainable outcomes<sup>9</sup>.

## **6.Challenges of the Congregation of the Mission in Addressing Ecological Issues and Ensuring Environmental Sustainability**

The Congregation of the Mission, like many religious organizations, faces numerous challenges on their path to addressing ecological issues and ensuring environmental sustainability:

- One of the main challenges is the tension between the need to protect the environment and the demands of modern society. Balancing the preservation of natural resources with the pressures of economic growth and development can be a difficult task.
- Another challenge is the lack of awareness and understanding among members of the congregation about environmental issues. Many people may not fully grasp the urgency of the situation or the impact that their actions have on the environment. Educating and mobilizing the congregation to take action on environmental issues can be a slow and challenging process.
- Financial constraints can also pose a challenge to the Congregation of the Mission's efforts to address ecological issues. Implementing sustainable practices and investing in environmentally-friendly initiatives often requires significant financial resources, which may be limited for the congregation.
- Additionally, the global nature of environmental issues means that collaboration and coordination with other organizations and stakeholders is essential. Building partnerships and working together with other groups can be challenging,

---

<sup>6</sup> Greenpeace, "About Us": <https://www.greenpeace.org/usa/>

<sup>7</sup> Interfaith Power & Light, "Mission Statement": <https://www.interfaithpowerandlight.org/mission/>

<sup>8</sup> Yale University, "Environmental Studies Program": <https://environment.yale.edu/>

<sup>9</sup> United Nations, "Environmental Justice": <https://www.un.org/en/sections/issues-depth/environmental-justice/index.html>

especially when there are differing priorities and approaches to addressing environmental sustainability.

Despite these challenges, the Congregation of the Mission remains committed to promoting environmental stewardship and sustainability. By raising awareness, educating their members, and taking concrete actions to reduce their environmental impact, the congregation is working towards a more sustainable future for all.

## Conclusion

What can be said in summary about the Church's stance on climate change and the Vincentian contribution to ecology today? It is evident that climate change has always been a concern for the Church. Pope Francis's "Laudato Si" is one of the most important documents addressing the Church's perspective on environmental conditions and changes affecting our common home—the earth. It is not an easy task; it is a battle that should be fought daily by the Church and every true Vincentian who is genuinely concerned with the conditions that climate change imposes on people, including poverty, suffering, and homelessness. This is why Pope Francis states: “An integral ecology is also made up of simple daily gestures which break with the logic of violence, exploitation, and selfishness.”<sup>10</sup>

This research has provided evidence that the Church is not merely a spectator but an active participant in this field. Through this research, it has become clear that the Vincentian family, in general, and certain individuals within the family, in particular, are deeply concerned with climate issues and are doing their best to improve the environment wherever they are.

## References

- Benedict XVI, Pope. (2007). *Address to the Diplomatic Corps accredited to the Holy See*. Retrieved from <https://www.vatican.va/>
- John Paul II, Pope. (2001). *Catechesis on the commitment to avert ecological catastrophe*. Retrieved from <https://www.vatican.va/>.
- Lieberman, Bruce. (2012). *The Catholic Church and Climate Change*, february 14.
- Mavric, Tomaž. (2022). *Reflection for the 2022 General Assembly, Vincentiana*, 66 (3 and 4)
- Paul VI, Pope. (1971). Apostolic Letter *Octogesima adveniens*. Retrieved from <https://www.vatican.va/>.
- Rolex, Jean, C.M. (2024). Communication Cont, Jan 17, 2024, Congregation of the Mission.
- Santos, Rolando. (2022). *The Mission Ad Gentes and the Identity of the Congregation of the Mission*. Vincentiana, 66.

---

<sup>10</sup> *Laudato Si*, p.230.



**Websites:**

- Greenpeace, "About Us": <https://www.greenpeace.org/usa/>
- Interfaith Power & Light, "Mission Statement": <https://www.interfaithpowerandlight.org/mission/>
- Yale University, "Environmental Studies Program": <https://environment.yale.edu/>
- United Nations, "Environmental Justice": <https://www.un.org/en/sections/issues-depth/environmental-justice/index.html>

**Journal**

National Report. 2013. *St. Vincent and the Grenadines: Third International Conference on Small Island Developing State, Ministry of health wellness and the Environment*, July.