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POPE FRANCIS AND JUSTICE FOR WORKERS

Mary Boyd has written this tribute on our behalf – thank you, Mary

In April, 2025, a day after Easter Sunday, the world mourned the passing of His Holiness Pope Francis. Five years earlier, on Easter Sunday, April 12, 2020 – and amid the devastating COVID-19 pandemic – he issued a powerful plea for economic justice, urging leaders to address the deepening crisis of insecurity faced by workers. His call for a **universal basic wage** (distinct from a universal basic income) sought to guarantee dignity and rights for all labourers – during the pandemic and beyond – underscoring the value of essential work. Half a decade later, the fundamental challenges he urged us to recognize remain unresolved. Unemployment is pervasive, economic inequality continues to widen, precarious labour conditions persist, and millions of workers still lack basic protections.

The Pope’s vision of a fairer economy resonates today: ‘This may be the time to consider a universal basic wage which would acknowledge and dignify the noble, essential tasks you carry out. It would ensure and concretely achieve the ideal, at once so human and so Christian, of no worker without rights’.

Life after the pandemic, the Pope argued, depended on universal access to the three Ts: trabajo (work), techo (housing), and tierra (land and food). **The Pontificate reminded us that guaranteeing a universal basic wage is inseparable from securing dignified work**

and living conditions for all – not just during crises, but as a lasting principle of well-being. This vision, rooted in papal encyclicals and international frameworks like the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, demands that economies prioritize human dignity over mere survival.

On October 2021, I joined Mariana Mazzucato, renowned economist and Levy Institute advisor, and other experts at the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences conference, where this imperative took centre stage. We both called for mobilising the public purse toward economic policies that are in service to collective well-being. My focus was on guaranteed employment for all; not just a crisis response to the pandemic, but as a policy that would help tackle runaway inequality, the slide into authoritarianism, and the fallout from extreme climate events. It would also allow Europe to emerge from the pandemic with a structural policy that can help mitigate economic cycles and deliver more effective social and policy integration across the continent.

‘Pope Francis had worked with Argentina’s Plan Jefes y Jefas: a program I studied during my dissertation fieldwork. Pope Francis had worked with the program’s cartoneros – the urban recyclers who cleaned up uplands and did essential environmental work, and who come from the poorest and most marginalized communities.’ (Excerpts from Dr Pavlina R. Tcherneva, President of the Levy Institute of Economics, *Remembering Pope Francis’s Call for a Universal Wage*, April 21, 2025)

Of the many wonderful encyclicals and statements from Pope Francis, one of the most powerful was the message he gave upon arriving in the Congo on January 31, 2023. He denounced the exploitation of the Democratic Republic of the Congo’s and of the continent’s vast resources: ‘Hands off the Democratic Republic of the Congo! Hands off Africa! Stop choking Africa: It is not a mine to be stripped or a terrain to be plundered.’ (Quoted by Michael Sean Winters, *National Catholic Reporter*.)

Pope Francis placed great hope in social movements that rise from the grassroots, especially. In *Fratelli Tutti*, (*Fraternity and Social Friendship*) he advocates on page 78, that the excluded be included in our common destiny and that it must happen in a way that will not betray their distinctive way of acting as ‘sowers of change, promoters of a process involving millions of actions, great and small, creatively intertwined like words of a poem. In that sense, such movements are “social poets” that in their own way, work, purpose, promote and liberate.’ They make possible ‘an integral human development that goes beyond the social policies being a policy for the poor, but never with the poor and never of the poor, much less a project that reunites peoples.’ He warns against leaving out the people in their daily struggle for dignity, in the building of their future. He gave concern about environmental degradation a spiritual meaning, alongside social justice and a preferential option for the poor and for the earth, our Common Home. He challenged economic and political policies and all of us to work for care of our sister earth.

BIODIVERSITY – FINDING THE RIGHT PATH

Indigenous communities across Africa have been faced with a loss of access to ancestral lands as a result of conservation efforts to preserve biodiversity and ecosystems.

Catholic Bishops in Africa have joined with other Catholic groups in urging both the European and the African Union to ensure that the funding of biodiversity conservation projects do not result in the displacement of Indigenous communities in that continent. The

Catholic appeal is part of a broader initiative to protect the human rights of Indigenous peoples and local communities, who make up a small portion of the global population but hold a hugely significant role as stewards of the world's biodiversity. A 2018 study found that the Indigenous peoples have tenure rights over more than a quarter of the world's land surface and roughly 40% of ecologically protected areas. Yet they face a recurring issue: conservation initiatives, much like development efforts, have led to eviction and displacement of Indigenous communities from lands they consider their natural home.

A nomadic people, the Baka are the first known inhabitants of Cameroon. They lived as hunter-gatherers across the lush rainforests of the Congo Basin for thousands of years but were displaced in the 1960s by extractive industries and conservation efforts. Both the outgoing French government and incoming independent government pushed the Baka people from the forests to allow logging and the creation of national parks.

Access was further limited in 1994 – two years after Cameroon ratified the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity – when government established conservation regulations for forests, fisheries and wildlife resources. These regulations included a provision restricting access to protected biodiversity areas.

'The forest for the Baka is a source of life. It gives us food: honey, fruits, wild tubers and wild game. It is also our pharmacy when we are sick. We get harassed by eco-guards when we enter the park in search of a means of survival.'

Across Africa there are systemic violations of Indigenous peoples' rights as governments and non-governmental organizations strive to keep environments inviolate. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Kahuzi-Biega National Park – a protected area and UNESCO World Heritage site renowned for its tropical forest and abundant biodiversity – has become a source of conflict. A 2022 report by the Minority Rights Group, documented 'the highly organised, grievous and widespread human rights abuses' that park guards and the Congolese army carried out between 2019 and 2021 against the Batwa people. The report titled *To Purge the Forest by Force: Organized Violence Against Batwa in Kahuzi-Biega National Park*, stated that the violence began after some Batwa families returned to their ancestral land inside the park. The authors gathered evidence of soldiers burning whole villages, of sexual violence against women and at least 20 Batwa members killed. The Batwa initially removed from the land in the 1970s were subjected to 'four decades of broken promises of resettlement, reparations and justice from the Congolese government and other stakeholders.'

Conservation efforts have also been a main driver of displacement in Tanzania, including for its Maasai people. From Ngorongoro, Loliondo and Ruaha, displacement is happening like never before. In Ngorongoro, the government is forcing around 100,000 people to move, in order to create an exclusive conservation scheme. A human rights lawyer, activist and a Maasai traditional leader said that the Tanzanian government is going so far as to use 'scorched-earth policy' to drive people out of the conservation parks. In Ngorongoro, the government, since 2022, has paralysed all social services in an effort to trigger mass displacement. In Loliondo, the government has seized and confiscated more than 58,000 livestock, including 36,000 between January and April 2024 – a blow to families' finances.

In light of these reports, Catholic Bishops in Africa are urging the European Union (EU) not to fund conservation projects that result in violation of Indigenous peoples' rights, calling for robust monitoring and accountability measures to ensure biodiversity finance does not lead to human rights abuses.

Officials of CIDSE (an international group of Catholic social justice organisations) presented their brief on 30 October 2024 at COP16 in Cali, Columbia. It urged the EU to prioritise

funding for agro-ecology and other sustainable farming practices to protect biodiversity, while safeguarding human rights. In addition, access to funds must be made easier for Indigenous peoples and local communities.

The Catholic groups stressed that biodiversity efforts must recognise the ‘crucial role’ Indigenous peoples play in protecting and restoring nature. The 2022 the Kunming-Montreal Global Diversity Framework includes recognition of Indigenous and local communities’ rights to their traditional lands. The most urgent measure to halt biodiversity loss is respecting the right of Indigenous peoples and other local communities to stay on the land and have control over decisions impacting their rights. These include not only land, but their access to resources like water, pasture and cultural practices, and their right to safeguard spiritual sites, which are not considered in conservation schemes. Co-management models are preferred that empower Indigenous peoples and local communities to protect biodiversity in partnership with global actors. ‘This means avoiding any kind of displacement and ensuring biodiversity finance is managed and monitored by local communities,’ the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM) said.

The African Bishops also called for legal recognition and protection of the human right to land as a fundamental element of effective biodiversity conservation.

Source: ‘Indigenous people lose homes to conservation efforts’ by Ngala Killian Chimtom, Earth Beat, a project of National Catholic Reporter, 30 October, 2024. Edited by Mary Boyd.

For Indigenous communities around the world, ‘land, water and food are not mere commodities, but the very basis of life and of these peoples’ bond with nature,’ Pope Francis said.

So, defending their rights to land, water and food ‘is not only a matter of justice, but also a guarantee of a sustainable future for all,’ he wrote in a message to the global meeting of the Indigenous Peoples’ Forum at the International Fund for Agricultural Development, February 2025.

Catholic News Service, Vatican City, 11 February 2025.

**Contributions to the Bulletin and responses to its content are welcomed. Deadline: 14th of each publication month.
Publication office in Sydney.**

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Design: Thanks to Marian Kelly (Sydney) for the gift of her talent and time.