

CHURCH OF SOUTH INDIA SYNOD SECRETARIAT
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‘GREEN CONFESSIONS’

A LENTEN CALL FOR A DISPOSABLE PLASTIC-FREE WORLD

CIRCULAR BY THE MODERATOR

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To all the Bishops in the Church of South India and to all who read or hear this Circular,
Mercy and Peace!

1. LENT: ECOLOGICAL REFLECTION

- 1.1.** The term *lent* is the abridged form of *Lenten*, derived from the word *lengthen*. During the winter season, which according to the ecologists is the ‘hibernal season’, the whole nature goes dormant. Since the days are short, the sun rays that fall on the earth are very less, and hence the earth freezes. To survive the harshness of winter, animals hibernate or migrate, and trees shed their leaves. Nature suddenly becomes lifeless. However, as the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley asks in his poem ‘Ode to the West Wind’, “O, wind, if winter comes, can spring be far behind?”. The spring season that follows winter has long days, and hence more sunrays fall upon the earth, melting the ice, reviving life. The long days in spring become a time of true festival for animals and plants to celebrate life. Hence, Lenten days remind us of nature calling us towards ‘life’.
- 1.2.** Therefore, to observe a meaningful lent, one needs to engage in the ministry of reviving life. This season is a time for the Church to recommit herself to join hands with nature and fight against all forces that thwart life around us. Jesus was a man who believed in bringing springs in others’ lives. He bloomed spring in those who were stripped of their life: the blind; the paralysed, the sick; the poor; the marginalised; the widows; the sinners, the discouraged; the defeated; and the dead. In Saint John 10¹⁰, Jesus says, ‘I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.’ Further, as Jesus encounters a Samaritan woman beside a well, He becomes a well-spring of life to her and says, ‘Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty (St John 4^{13, 14}).’
- 1.3.** Today, one cannot think about life only in terms of its anthropological dimension. The current (geo) political and (socio) cultural debates as well as academic and economic discourses about life are rewriting the matrix of life in the light of current ecological crises. God is not only concerned about human life, but also about the whole of creation, as it is mentioned in Matthew 6²⁶, ‘Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them.’ The

Bible teaches us that, 'the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now (Romans 8²²).' This paradigmatic shift of considering life from with its anthropological dimensions to ecological dimensions calls us too to make this season of lent not only to repent our ecological sins that exploit life and life forms but also to resist all forces that destroy ecology and participate with God and His creation to 'spring' ecological life.

2. THE PLASTIC CATASTROPHE: OUR SIN

- 2.1. We have learned in our history classes that historians and archaeologists have divided periods of human history as Stone Age, Bronze Age, or Iron Age. This classification is based on the technologies or materials that made the most significant impact on society. If so, what age are we in now? According to some researchers, we live in the 'Plastic Age'.
- 2.2. The world is currently producing nearly 300 million tons of plastic each year. Although plastic is a useful product, many of these products are created for single-use; with an estimated 50 per cent of plastic used once and thrown away. More than half of all plastic manufactured becomes trash in less than a year. Disposed plastic materials can remain in the environment for up to 2,000 years and longer. India may not be a top global consumer of plastics, but it has reduced rates of waste management. Sadly, the recycling sector of our nation is informal and unregulated. While India generates 33.1 million pounds of plastic waste every day, only 19.8 million pounds are collected and recycled. Rest of the plastic trash is left uncollected, and they pollute water, clog drains, kill cows and degrade soil.
- 2.3. Plastic affects human health. The burning of plastic in the open air leads to environmental pollution due to the release of poisonous chemicals. The polluted air, when inhaled by humans and animals, affects their health and can cause respiratory problems or cancer. Plastic is harmful also because it is 'Non-Biodegradable'. When thrown on land, plastic makes the soil less fertile. When thrown in water, plastic chokes our ponds, rivers and oceans and harms the sea life. Toxic chemicals that leach out of plastic and are found in the blood and tissue of nearly all of us. Exposure to them is linked to cancers, congenital disabilities, impaired immunity, endocrine disruption and other ailments. Two broad classes of plastic-related chemicals that are of critical concern for human health are *bisphenol-A* (BPA); and additives used in the synthesis of plastics, which are known as *phthalates*.
- 2.4. Plastic spoils our groundwater. Toxic chemicals from plastics drain out and seep into groundwater, flowing downstream into lakes and rivers. There are long-term risks of contamination of soils and groundwater by some additives and breakdown by-products in plastics, which can become persistent organic pollutants.
- 2.5. Plastic attracts other pollutants. Chemicals in plastic which give them their rigidity or flexibility (flame retardants, bisphenols, phthalates and other harmful chemicals) are

oily poisons that repel water and stick to petroleum-based objects like plastic debris. So, the toxic chemicals that leach out of plastics can accumulate on other plastics, and this becomes a serious concern as increasing amounts of plastic debris collect in oceans. Fish, exposed to a mixture of polyethylene with chemical pollutants absorbed from the marine environment, accumulate these chemical pollutants and suffer liver toxicity.

- 2.6.** Plastic threatens wildlife. Wild animals and birds, confused with plastic, eat it or mistake it for food and feed it to their young. Over 260 species, including invertebrates, turtles, fish, seabirds and mammals, are reported to have been consuming plastic debris, resulting in impaired movement and feeding, reduced reproductive output, lacerations, ulcers and death.
- 2.7.** Plastic poisons our food chain. Even plankton, the tiniest creatures in our oceans, are eating micro plastics and absorbing their hazardous chemicals. The little, broken down pieces of plastic is displacing the algae needed to sustain larger sea life. Contaminated plastics, when ingested by marine species, present a probable route for the POPs (Persistent Organic Pollutants) to enter the marine food web.
- 2.8.** Therefore, we should understand that we are not only living in the 'Plastic Age', but also that we are causing/facing a 'Plastic Catastrophe'. In 2018, during the World Environment Day, the Central Government made one of the farthest-reaching commitments by any country to tackle the plastic catastrophe by announcing that India would by 2022, "eliminate all single-use plastics from our beautiful country." This announcement builds on state-specific bans on the manufacture, supply, storage and use of plastics. Many breakthrough moves have already been initiated by various states like Sikkim, Goa, Jammu and Kashmir, Karnataka, Punjab and Tamilnadu to cut down plastic consumption and manage the real waste across their jurisdiction. The Church of South India appreciates this bold initiative, and we urge all other States also to follow the same.
- 2.9.** As Christians, how do we address the plastic catastrophe? Is it just another ecological challenge? We need to consider the plastic catastrophe as a result of our ecological sin. It is a sin: a sin of irresponsibility; a sin of insensitivity; a sin of insensibility; and a sin of incorrigibility. As we actively or passively become part of plastic pollution, we are irresponsible and unaccountable to the Creator God, insensitive to rest of the creation, insensible to the wisdom that calls us to care nature, and we are engaging in a sin that cannot be corrected by any corrective/compensative measures.

3. LENT: A TIME FOR GREEN-CONFESSIONS

- 3.1.** Forty days of Lent is often related to Moses' 40 days on the mountain with God, the 40-year journey of the Israelites in the desert, and Jesus' 40-day period of fasting and temptation. The Church of South India, joining with the universal Church, observe 40

days of Lent, from Wednesday, March 06, 2019 to Saturday, April 20, 2019, as a time to reflect on God's purpose for our life as well as to repent and reorient our lives to accomplish God's will. Further, during Lent, through abstaining from certain habits and fasting, we engage in self-examination and penitence, preparing ourselves for Easter, the victory of life over death.

- 3.2.** As I have already shared, this year's Lent should become a time to repent our ecological sins that exploit life, a time to resist all forces that destroy life and to recommit ourselves to revive life. For such a Lent, one needs to take an uncompromising position to make at least 10 'Green Confessions' particularly concerning our excessive use of plastic that destroys all kinds of life on earth. I urge all our dioceses and congregations to use these 10 'Green Confessions' as part of their liturgy during these 40 days of Lent.

4. GREEN-CONFESSIONS

- 4.1.** Lord, we repent and confess that by our unlimited use of plastic bags, we have destroyed life. We pray that You would give us the determination to avoid plastic bags in our houses, churches, shops and streets.
- 4.2.** Lord, we repent and confess that by our unlimited use of plastic bottles, we have destroyed life. We pray that You would give us the determination to avoid plastic bottles in our houses, churches, shops and streets.
- 4.3.** Lord, we repent and confess that by our unlimited use of plastic flex, we have destroyed life. We pray that You would give us the determination to avoid plastic flex in our houses, churches, shops and streets.
- 4.4.** Lord, we repent and confess that by our unlimited use of plastic packages, we have destroyed life. We pray that You would give us the determination to avoid plastic packages in our houses, churches, shops and streets.
- 4.5.** Lord, we repent and confess that by our unlimited use of plastic straws, we have destroyed life. We pray that You would give us the determination to avoid plastic straws in our houses, churches, shops and streets.
- 4.6.** Lord, we repent and confess that by our unlimited use of plastic toys, we have destroyed life. We pray that You would give us the determination to avoid plastic toys/items in our houses, churches, shops and streets.
- 4.7.** Lord, we repent and confess that by our unlimited use of disposable plastic crockeries, we have destroyed life. We pray that You would give us the determination to avoid disposable plastic crockeries in our houses, churches, shops and streets.
- 4.8.** Lord, we repent and confess that by our unlimited use of balloons, we have destroyed life. We pray that You would give us the determination to avoid balloons in our houses, churches, shops and streets.
- 4.9.** Lord, we repent and confess that by our unlimited use of plastic microbeads, we have destroyed life. We pray that You would give us the determination to avoid plastic microbeads in our houses, churches, shops and streets.
- 4.10.** Lord, we repent and confess that by our unlimited use of plastic fabrics, we have destroyed life. We pray that You would give us the determination to avoid plastic fabrics in our houses, churches, shops and streets.

5. CONCLUSION

These 'Green Confessions' are not only to be prayed, but also to be practised. If we live a life committed to avoiding all kinds of disposable plastics, the manufacturers would be forced to avoid all disposable plastics, and thus we would be contributing towards a lesser carbon footprint. If lent is a time we think upon how to foster life, rather than destroying life, it is our spiritual commitment to avoid plastics since it 'kills' life. As I hope that this year's lent would be a meaningful time to reflect, repent, reorient and rededicate our lives to accomplish God's will, I ardently pray that God would enable all of us to continue our life in an eco-spiritual pilgrimage fighting against all causes of ecological catastrophes, particularly the disposable plastic catastrophe. **To begin with, let us during this Lenten season avoid all disposable plastics, especially flex, plastic bottles, cups and plates, and instead use cloth banners, steel plates and glasses. For a total ban of disposable plastics, we urge the Central Government to formulate strict laws and ensure the systematic and strong implementation of their pledge to ban disposable plastic materials.**

(You are encouraged to translate this to your regional language and publish it in your Diocesan journal or in appropriate forums.)