Introduction: The Crisis of Ecology and Spirit

In this age of planetary upheaval, marked by climate instability, mass extinction, and profound spiritual dislocation, the need for integrative frameworks that can hold ecological, cultural, and theological complexity has become urgent. As the intertwined crises of the Anthropocene deepen, so too does the demand for ways of thinking and being that refuse the false binaries of human versus nonhuman, science versus spirit, and action versus contemplation. In such a moment, *integral ecology* emerges not as a singular theory but as a plural and participatory invitation: to think with complexity, to live in communion, and to act in care (Kelly, Mickey, and Robbert 2017, 2).

This paper explores how the principle of *communion*, a central component to the framework of integral ecology, can be deepened through theological reflection on *kenosis*, or self-emptying, and articulated through a phenomenological ethic of *ecological intentionality*. In particular, I will argue that an "integral ecology of the cross," one that combines communion, kenosis, and ecological intentionality, offers a meaningful framework for faith-based ecological activism and interspecies solidarity. It reframes the Christian symbol of the cross not as a tool of imperial sacrifice or abstract salvation, but as an ecological gesture of descent: a humble participation in the mutual vulnerability of the world.

Integral ecology, as articulated in *The Variety of Integral Ecologies*, insists that ecological knowledge must be complex, subjective, and grounded in both interiority and relational communion (Kelly, Mickey, and Robbert 2017, 3–5). This mirrors the insights of thinkers like Thomas Berry, who calls for a new cosmology rooted in shared being and sacred

depth (Berry 1999, 82), and Robin Wall Kimmerer, who describes the ecological world as alive with gratitude, reciprocity, and kinship (Kimmerer 2013, 115). Yet within this emerging integral vision, there remains room to more fully explore theological categories that can speak to the depth of crisis and the depth of response now needed.

Here, I propose that *kenosis* as a pattern of divine self-emptying described in Philippians 2 (one of the most ancient hymns of the New Testament that Paul repurposes for his own argument) offers a necessary expansion to integral ecology's vision. It adds the element of radical humility and spiritual decentering, inviting human beings to recognize their interconnection with the more-than-human in the Gaia-sphere and relinquish dominance and enter into active vulnerability. This echoes Leonardo Boff's theology of the Earth as "a suffering God," wounded by anthropocentric exploitation yet calling humanity toward compassion and transformation (Boff 1997, 34). Likewise, Catherine Keller's apophatic entanglements point toward a theological method that embraces unknowing, relational depth, and ecological interbeing (Keller 2015, 22).

At the same time, this inquiry draws on phenomenology, particularly the insights of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Edith Stein, to propose a practical and philosophical ethic of *ecological intentionality*, wherein perception becomes a site of relational participation. To "let the tree be the tree," in Merleau-Ponty's terms, is not to passively observe but to actively allow otherness its own fullness (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 353). In Stein's language, empathy becomes a bridge across difference, not a projection but an attentiveness to the irreducibility of another's presence (Stein 1989, 11). Such insights form the ground for what I am calling *ecological*

kenosis: a spiritual and perceptual practice of surrendering anthropocentric certainty in favor of relational presence and sacramental awareness.

This paper, then, proceeds in six movements. First, I will unpack the principle of communion within integral ecology and its broader cosmological implications. Second, I will examine kenosis as an ecological and theological principle, drawing from Christian mysticism, liberation theology, and process thought. Third, I will bring phenomenology into dialogue with integral ecology to develop the method of ecological intentionality. Fourth, I offer a case study on fire (literal, mythic, and symbolic) as a sacrament of ecological communion, grounded in indigenous practices and theological reflection. Fifth, I synthesize these elements into a constructive proposal for an "ecology of the cross." Finally, I conclude with implications for theology, ecological activism, and spiritual formation in this time of planetary transition.

In approaching these themes, I do not seek to offer a systematic solution to ecological collapse, but rather a theological reorientation: a way of being-with the world that is rooted in communion, shaped by kenosis, and practiced through intentional presence. In this reorientation or turning to draw from Keller, the cross itself is not a sign of domination or abstract redemption, but of shared becoming and of divine descent into the vulnerabilities and the possibilities of peace beyond the human in our sphere of being.

Integral Ecology and the Principle of Communion

At the heart of integral ecology lies a profound metaphysical and practical claim: that all beings exist not as isolated entities but as participants in a cosmic communion. This principle of

communion, central to the framework laid out by Sean Kelly, Sam Mickey, and Adam Robbert in *The Variety of Integral Ecologies*, extends beyond moral appeals to environmental care. It articulates a vision of being in which relationality, interdependence, and reciprocity are not ethical afterthoughts but constitutive of reality itself (Kelly, Mickey, and Robbert 2017, 5). In this section, I argue that communion, as both cosmological orientation and practical ethic, functions as the theological and philosophical foundation for an integral ecology capable of meeting the intertwined crises of spirit and biosphere.

Kelly and colleagues outline five principles of integral ecology: complexity, subjectivity, interiority, agency, and communion. While all are essential to the multidimensional vision of integral ecologies, communion provides an integrating force that binds the others together. Without communion, complexity risks fragmentation; subjectivity may become solipsism; interiority may fall into spiritual privatism; and agency may revert to domination. Communion instead invites us into what Thomas Berry calls the "Great Work" of our time: to reinhabit the Earth as sacred community (Berry 1999, 3). It is a call to perceive the Earth not as a collection of capitalistic or market-based resources, backdrop, or enemy, but as kin, gift, and sacrament.

This vision of communion pushes beyond secular or scientific understandings of ecological interconnection. It does not merely describe causal or systemic linkages, but it insists on *participation*. Mickey notes that "communion names the interconnectedness and interpermeation of beings across all scales and modes of existence" (Kelly, Mickey, and Robbert 2017, 190). Such language aligns with mystical and metaphysical traditions, from Nicholas of Cusa to Teilhard de Chardin to Whitehead, that view reality as an unfolding relational process.

Communion, in this sense, is not only ecological but also ontological and eschatological: it names a way of being that is simultaneously ancient and emergent.

One of the most evocative expressions of communion in the anthology comes from Elizabeth Allison, who argues that communion requires epistemic humility and affective attunement. Drawing on her research with practitioners of nature-based spirituality, she writes: "Communion is not just an idea but a felt experience of participation, presence, and mutual recognition" (Kelly, Mickey, and Robbert 2017, 153). This affective register is critical, as it allows communion to be practiced through ritual, storytelling, silence, and song, not only through policy or philosophy. Communion is both worldview and heart orientation. It does not ask us merely to understand the Earth, but it invites us to love it, to be changed by it, and to grieve with it.

Robin Wall Kimmerer captures this spirit in her weaving of Indigenous wisdom with ecological science. In *Braiding Sweetgrass*, she writes: "In a culture of gratitude, everyone knows that gifts will follow the circle of reciprocity and flow back to you again. This feeling of gratitude is so pervasive that it animates every act of life" (Kimmerer 2013, 115). For Kimmerer, communion is enacted through gift exchange, thanksgiving, and the daily practices of care and attention. It is not abstract metaphysics. Communion is embodied and lived. Her work reminds us that communion must also be *decolonized*: it must acknowledge the broken covenants, the severed kinship ties, and the extractive logics that have distorted our relationships to land and other beings.

Similarly, Edgar Morin's call for a "homeland Earth" with humanity as "co-pilots of Earth" underscores that communion is not merely sentimental but radically political. For Morin,

the planetary condition demands a new anthropology. This must be one in which humans no longer imagine themselves apart from nature but *within* the web of life (Morin 1999, 56). He writes, "We must conceive the Earth as our Homeland, and each of us as citizens of that Homeland" (Morin 1999, 58). This planetary consciousness echoes integral ecology's expansive vision, where communion implies responsibility to the local and the whole.

Still, the principle of communion can be easily co-opted. Without attentiveness to power, communion risks becoming another form of liberal inclusivity, well-meaning but inattentive to structural violence, colonial histories, and market-based data inputs. A truly integral communion must make space for rupture, lament, and the kenotic emptying of privilege. As Catherine Keller reminds us, relationality must also be "entangled" with difference, conflict, and the apophatic unknown (Keller 2015, 48). True communion, then, is not consensus or sameness. True communion is the difficult, often painful practice of being-with in vulnerability of this sphere.

Thus, communion within integral ecology is not simply a spiritual metaphor. Communion becomes a material and metaphysical reality, a cosmological orientation, and an ethical invitation. It calls us to remember what many Indigenous and religious traditions have long known: that all beings live in sacred relation, that perception is participation, and that ecological healing must begin with spiritual conversion. The theological motif of *kenosis*, divine self-emptying, can deepen this call by offering a relational and radically vulnerable practice of communion. It is in this vulnerability, this shared descent, that a true ecology of the cross begins.

Kenosis as Ecological Principle: Emptying for the Whole

If communion is the metaphysical and experiential heart of integral ecology, then its spiritual practice may be *kenosis* as the self-emptying of power, privilege, and fixed identity. Derived from the Greek verb *kenóō*, meaning "to empty," kenosis most notably appears in the Pauline hymn (probably pre-dating even Paul in what is considered his earliest epistle) of Philippians 2, where Christ is described as "emptying himself" (*ἐκένωσεν*), taking the form of a servant, and humbling himself even to the point of death (Phil. 2:7–8, NRSV). Within Christian theological traditions, kenosis is often interpreted as a model of divine humility and relational vulnerability. When recontextualized within the framework of integral ecology, kenosis becomes a powerful lens through which to reimagine human participation in the Earth community, not as dominion but as descent, not as conquest but as relinquishment.

Leonardo Boff, one of the early architects of ecotheology, identifies this kenotic posture as a necessary corrective to anthropocentric theology. He writes, "The Earth is not an object to be dominated but a subject to be communed with. It is wounded and cries out in pain. The proper response is not control, but compassion" (Boff 1997, 34). For Boff, kenosis is not merely a Christological doctrine but an ecological ethic and a call for humanity to renounce its godlike fantasies and instead form solidarity with the vulnerable. This is not a sentimental move but a radical spiritual transformation. Kenosis, in this framing, is the act of making space for others, for the Earth, for God. This is done not through erasure but through relational humility.

This vision echoes Catherine Keller's work on negative theology and planetary entanglement. In *Cloud of the Impossible*, Keller proposes that theology must move not toward clarity and control, but toward mystery, multiplicity, and co-presence. She writes, "To unknowing belongs an ethical disposition, an openness to alterity, a hospitality to the

ungraspable" (Keller 2015, 49). In Keller's apophatic entanglement, kenosis becomes a methodological and spiritual discipline of a letting-go, of mastery, and an entering into the dark cloud of relational unknowing (echoing the writing of early Medieval Christian mystics such as John of the Cross). This is precisely the kind of kenotic posture that integral ecology demands: one that can live in complexity without resolving it and act without dominating.

Kenosis also finds resonance in process theology, particularly in the work of Alfred North Whitehead and his theological interpreters. John Cobb, for instance, reads the Whiteheadian God not as an omnipotent controller but as The *fellow sufferer who understands*, a God whose power is persuasive rather than coercive, and who lures creation toward novelty through relational presence (Cobb 1965, 149). In this view, God's kenosis is continuous and participatory: the divine is always pouring into the world, not in domination but in co-creation. Such a vision reimagines power not as control but as vulnerability; not as unilateral will but as shared becoming.

This process-relational view of kenosis also complements the integral ecology principle of *agency*. Agency here is not confined to humans or divine fiat but distributed across a participatory cosmos. When humans adopt a kenotic stance, they are not giving up agency but redistributing it by recognizing the agency of fire, forest, fungus, and the fox who takes more tracks than necessary, some in the wrong direction (drawing upon Wendell Berry). Kenosis, in this sense, becomes a decolonial practice: it entails relinquishing epistemic and ontological privilege in favor of mutual recognition and shared stewardship.

Such a vision is particularly important when thinking about ecological crisis. Too often, environmental discourse adopts a savior complex, in which humans are positioned as the ones

who must "fix" the Earth, typically through reductionistic and technocratic solutions that leave dominant paradigms intact. Kenosis offers a different path for practitioners, not of heroism but of humility. It invites us to grieve, listen, and step aside when necessary. As Joanna Macy and Molly Brown write in their work on the "Work That Reconnects," the first step toward ecological healing is to *honor our pain for the world* and to allow ourselves to be moved, broken, and reconstituted in relation (Macy and Brown 2014, 27). This, too, is kenosis: to allow the sorrow of the world to inhabit us without rushing to mastery.

Yet this form of self-emptying must not collapse into quietism or passivity. Kenosis, rightly understood, is not self-erasure but *self-offering*. It is not withdrawal but *transformation*. As seen in Christ's descent and resurrection, kenosis is paradoxically a path to fullness, not through assertion, but through love. When reframed ecologically, kenosis becomes the spiritual disposition required for true communion: the willingness to relinquish superiority in favor of interdependence, to unlearn mastery in favor of mutual becoming.

This kenotic ecology also aligns with Indigenous cosmologies emphasizing reciprocity, humility, and respect. Robin Wall Kimmerer describes this beautifully in her reflection on the *Honorable Harvest*: "Take only what you need. Use everything you take. Give a gift in reciprocity for what you have taken. Sustain the ones who sustain you" (Kimmerer 2013, 183). Such practices model a kenotic way of life as a continual emptying and giving, not in scarcity but in sacred circulation.

In sum, kenosis serves as a necessary deepening of the integral ecology framework. If communion describes the fabric of relational being, kenosis describes the shape of our ethical and spiritual participation in that fabric. It asks us to descend rather than ascend, to make space

rather than seize space, to love rather than control. Doing so prepares us for a phenomenological and theological praxis that sees and lives with the world differently. As I explore in the following, this transformation of vision and presence is what I am calling *ecological intentionality*.

Phenomenology and Ecological Intentionality

While the principle of *communion* gives integral ecology its ontological grounding, and *kenosis* offers its spiritual ethic, the cultivation of *ecological intentionality* enables its practice. Intentionality, in the phenomenological tradition, refers to the "aboutness" of consciousness and its directedness toward something beyond itself. In its ecological application, intentionality becomes how humans attend to, perceive, and participate with the more-than-human world in ways that resist objectification and invite relationship. I argue that ecological intentionality, deeply shaped by phenomenological insights from Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, and Stein, provides a crucial methodological bridge between theological kenosis and integral ecology's call for communion.

In classical phenomenology, Edmund Husserl defines intentionality as the structure of consciousness that always points toward an object. Consciousness is never self-enclosed but always reaches outward (Husserl 1970, 84). This reaching, however, is not simply a neutral gaze; it carries with it modes of perception, value, and framing. Maurice Merleau-Ponty radicalizes this insight by emphasizing the *embodiment* of intentionality. We do not merely observe the world, but we *inhabit* it. "The body is our general medium for having a world," he writes, "and

perception is a kind of nascent Logos" (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 203). This embodied perception is not a detached scrutiny but a form of participatory sense-making.

In the context of ecology, this means that how we see trees, rivers, fire, and soil is not simply a function of biological optics but of metaphysical disposition. Do we see a tree as lumber or as kin? As data or as being-in-relation? Ecological intentionality asks us to examine not just what we perceive but how, and to what ends. It requires an unlearning of the Cartesian divide and a re-learning of presence, sensitivity, and attention.

Edith Stein's work on empathy deepens this claim. For Stein, empathy (*Einfühlung*) is the act of perceiving the other not merely as object but as a *subject,* as possessing an inner life (Stein 1989, 11). Empathy is not a projection of one's feelings onto another, but a receptivity to the irreducible otherness of another's experience. This insight is profoundly relevant for ecological practice. To adopt ecological intentionality is to begin the difficult, often uncertain work of empathizing with nonhuman others, not anthropomorphizing them, but allowing their being to impress upon us. It is to let the oak tree be the oak tree, the crow be the crow, without reducing them to function or metaphor.

This ethic of letting-be is mirrored in Keiji Nishitani's Buddhist-inflected phenomenology. In *Religion and Nothingness*, Nishitani argues that true realization (*satori*) occurs not through grasping but through emptiness and through a letting-go of egoic projections in order to encounter beings as they are, in their suchness (Nishitani 1982, 140). This is not passivity but a kind of active relinquishment. I call this *kenotic seeing*. When applied to ecology, such a practice becomes a spiritual discipline of perception: a clearing of the mind and self so that the more-than-human world can be encountered on its own terms.

This resonates with integral ecology's emphasis on *interiority* and *subjectivity* (Kelly, Mickey, and Robbert 2017, 4–5). Rather than locating subjectivity solely within the human, integral ecology suggests that all beings possess some form of interior life, however seemingly non-conscious or especially non-linguistic (in the human sense of the concept). Ecological intentionality becomes a way of aligning our perception with this insight. It invites us to become attuned to the "silent" voices of trees (which are not silent), the presence of fire, and the agency of wind and fungus. These are not metaphors. These are realities that become visible when perception is purified by humility.

Practically, this has shaped my own practice of ecological attentiveness, for example, in relation to the black walnut tree I've been observing daily. At first, I watched the tree as an environmental object by tracking its growth, shedding, and relation to season and soil. But over time, that practice shifted into presence: a kind of slow encounter that felt less like study and more like companionship. There were mornings when I did not write down anything, only sat and watched as squirrels navigated the upper branches or shadows shifted across the bark. What emerged was not data but reverence. This is ecological intentionality: not a method of mastery, but a method of *being-with*.

As Allison and other contributors in *The Variety of Integral Ecologies* note, such forms of attentiveness are crucial for developing a more-than-human ethics. They write, "Integral ecology requires a shift from epistemologies of separation to epistemologies of relation and perception" (Kelly, Mickey, and Robbert 2017, 147). Ecological intentionality is that shift. It is the movement from control to communion, from grasping to openness, from representation to participation.

In this way, ecological intentionality does not stand apart from the theological insights of communion and kenosis—it embodies them. To see with empathy, to let-be, to attend in reverence is itself a kenotic act. It is the emptying of human centrality in favor of intersubjective relation. It is also, crucially, a mode of *spiritual formation*, or a contemplative path through which ecological consciousness is not merely thought but lived.

In the next section, I will explore how these philosophical and theological insights become sacramentally embodied in the practice and symbolism of fire. Through the lens of indigenous fire practices and theological reflection, we will consider fire as a material and metaphorical agent of communion. Ecological intentionality, kenosis, and the cross converge in a compost heap on this site of being.

Fire as Communion and Sacrament: A Case Study

Fire is an agent of paradox. It destroys and renews, consumes and creates, terrifies and sanctifies. Across cultures and cosmologies, fire has symbolized divine presence, sacrifice, purification, and transformation. In the context of ecological thought and integral theology, fire also serves as a compelling case study, material and metaphysically metaphorical, for communion, kenosis, and intentional presence. I argue that fire is a site of ecological and theological encounter, drawing from Indigenous fire practices, Christian sacramental theology, and integral ecology's call to sacred reciprocity. I argue that fire, when perceived through the lens of ecological intentionality and kenosis, becomes not merely a tool or element but a sacrament of communion, an altar where the ecology of the cross is enacted.

Indigenous fire stewardship practices across Turtle Island (North America) reveal a sophisticated understanding of fire as an agent of balance, regeneration, and relationship. Far from being merely destructive, cultural burning practices have been used for millennia to cultivate biodiversity, enhance food systems, and maintain relational reciprocity with land and species (Whyte 2013, 7). For many Indigenous communities, fire is kin and a being with whom humans enter into a covenantal relationship. As Margo Robbins of the Yurok tribe notes, "When we light a fire, we are in ceremony. The fire is not just a tool—it is a being we pray with" (quoted in Kimmerer 2020, 202). This perception reframes fire not as human property but as a sacred collaborator.

Violently disrupted by colonial suppression and fire exclusion policies, these practices are now being reintegrated into contemporary ecological restoration efforts, often with dramatic success compared to previous Western tactics of domination and suppression. But beyond the practical benefits, these revitalizations call us to recognize a different metaphysics of land and agency that aligns closely with integral ecology's principles of subjectivity, agency, and communion (Kelly, Mickey, and Robbert 2017, 5). To work with fire in these traditions is to submit to a deeper rhythm—a kenotic relinquishing of control in favor of relational flow.

Theologically, fire has long been a sign of divine presence and purification. From the burning bush that confronts Moses with holy mystery (Exod. 3:2), to the tongues of flame at Pentecost (Acts 2:3), to the refiner's fire in Malachi (Mal. 3:2), the biblical imagination casts fire not merely as judgment but as transformation. In Christian sacramental theology, particularly in the mysticism of the Eastern tradition, fire is associated with the purifying love of God as a consuming flame that does not destroy but transfigures. As theologian Sergius Bulgakov writes,

"The fire of the Spirit burns, not with the fire of wrath, but with the fire of love, which sanctifies and illumines" (Bulgakov 2004, 93). In this view, fire is not only a metaphor for the divine. Instead, it is the very medium through which matter becomes radiant.

This sacramental vision resonates with an integral understanding of fire as more-than-material. If communion is the pattern of reality, and kenosis the ethic of participation, then fire is the liturgical expression of both: a medium through which beings are drawn together in mutual transformation. In Indigenous fire ceremonies, this is quite literal as human, plant, animal, and element converge in a shared act of regeneration. In Christian liturgy, fire appears at Easter in the lighting of the Paschal candle as a symbol of resurrection life emerging from the dark tomb. Both gestures acknowledge fire as a site of threshold: where endings meet beginnings, where death becomes seedbed for new life.

From a phenomenological perspective, fire invites a unique kind of attentiveness. To sit with fire is to engage in a form of presence that resists control. One cannot stare at fire without being drawn in. The movement of fire is dynamic yet never erratic; its form is always shifting and never settled. Merleau-Ponty might describe this as fire's *flesh*, or its capacity to both reveal and conceal, to give itself to perception while withholding full comprehension (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 147). In the presence of fire, ecological intentionality becomes a kind of contemplative reverence: a practice of being-with a force that exceeds human shaping but responds to human intention and directedness (and in turn directing the human).

This has been true in my own life as I've explored the spiritual ecology of fire in the Carolina Piedmont. In tracking the rhythms of prescribed burns, I have observed how oak and longleaf pine ecosystems depend on fire not as an interruption but as an essential rhythm. Fire is

not an intruder in these forests, but it is their heartbeat as the Cherokee and Catawba so intimately understood. Lighting a controlled fire in these lands, in collaboration with ecologists and Indigenous fire practitioners, is not an act of mastery but an invitation. The flames clear the underbrush, awaken dormant seeds, allow for healthy biomes for mammals, insects, and fungi, and create space for the whole forest to breathe again. Witnessing this process felt like attending a liturgy: the fire a priest, the smoke a rising prayer to communion.

Integral ecology demands that we not only theorize communion but enact it. Fire offers one of the most embodied ways to do so through ritual, through presence, and shared vulnerability. But this vulnerability must be held with care. As climate change intensifies and fire regimes become more erratic and devastating, we are reminded that communion without kenosis is dangerous. Engaging in fire responsibly requires relinquishing the illusion of control and entering into partnership with Indigenous communities, ecosystems, and fire itself.

In this way, fire becomes a teacher of the cross. It invites us to die to domination, to burn away false securities or anxieties and social ills at the root cause of our current personal, political, and climatic strife, and to rise into mutual dependence. It reminds us that transformation is not clean or safe. Transformation is consuming. And yet it is in the ashes that new life takes root. The cross, long seen and preached as the apex of substitutional sacrifice and suffering, may itself be reimagined as an ecological site of communion and kenosis, lit by the flame of divine presence and the pain of planetary becoming.

Toward an Integral Ecology of the Cross

The preceding sections have traced a path through the core principles of integral ecology, especially communion and subjectivity, while deepening their implications through theological kenosis, phenomenological attentiveness, and the symbolic and material power of fire. What now emerges is a vision I am calling an *integral ecology of the cross*. This is a framework that weaves together metaphysical interrelation, spiritual descent, and ecological participation in a way that responds to our planetary moment. This synthesis is not simply theological in nature; it is a call to practice a new form of being: one that embraces vulnerability, centers relationship, and honors the sacredness of interdependence, even in the face of death and collapse.

As a theological symbol, the cross has long been burdened with triumphalist and substitutionary theological interpretations. Within many Western Christian frameworks, it has been cast primarily as a transaction or marketplace object to appease divine wrath or as an emblem of redemptive suffering. Such interpretations have too often obscured the relational, participatory, and cosmological meanings embedded in the cross. Re-read through the lens of integral ecology and ecological kenosis, however, the cross becomes not a legal or substitutionary or market symbol but a *cosmic invitation* and a sacrament of deep relationality forged through descent, suffering, and transformation.

In Philippians 2, the kenotic descent of Christ does not end in defeat but leads to the unveiling of divine glory *within* vulnerability (Phil. 2:5–11). In this way, the cross is not opposed to communion; it is *the deepest realization of it*. To take up the cross, then, is to step into a way of being that refuses dominance, embraces ecological humility, and participates in the suffering of the Earth without attempting to master or bypass it. It is, as Whitehead might say, to enter the

"consequent nature of God" as a place where all experiences, even the most tragic, are gathered and transfigured (Whitehead 1978, 350).

Integral ecology's emphasis on complexity and entanglement underscores this reading. The ecological crisis is not a discrete "problem" to be solved; it is a condition that implicates all of us in a web of responsibility and loss. An integral ecology of the cross acknowledges this entanglement and reframes it as a sacred burden and a holy task. Catherine Keller writes, "We are entangled, not because we choose to be, but because we are. The question is whether we can learn to bear this entanglement well" (Keller 2015, 7). The cross, in this context, becomes the sign and the waypoint of learning to bear entanglement, to remain present in the suffering of the Earth without rushing to mastery or despair.

Such a framework has direct implications for ecological theology and spiritual practice. First, it calls for a re-sacramentalization of the Earth, not as an object of reverence at a distance, but as the very body of God in which suffering, beauty, and transformation co-exist. This aligns with Thomas Berry's insistence that the universe is a "communion of subjects, not a collection of objects" (Berry 1999, 17), and with Kimmerer's vision of the land as teacher, relative, and sacred text (Kimmerer 2013, 128). To see the Earth as cross-bearing is to see it as participating in divine becoming. The Earth is wounded, yes, but it is also luminous.

Second, it offers a paradigm for ecological ethics and theologies that resists both apathy and activism rooted in control. An ecology of the cross does not seek to "fix" the planet in technocratic terms; it seeks to live into a posture of participation, reverence, and mutual vulnerability. This posture includes lament as a central act. As Joanna Macy and Molly Brown remind us, "To let ourselves feel the pain of the world is to connect with the pulse of life" (Macy

and Brown 2014, 27). The cross is not about redemptive suffering per se; it is about refusing to look away from what is dying and being willing to be changed by it.

Third, this framework reframes spiritual formation. Practices of prayer, contemplation, and sacramental living are not escapist retreats from ecological reality. They are disciplines that teach us how to dwell in complexity and communion. Ecological intentionality becomes a spiritual path: to sit with a dying species, walk in fire-pruned woods, and mourn lost wetlands like a sibling and kin. These are acts of faith, not in a *deus ex machina* project, but in a divine reality that suffers and transforms with us.

Finally, this vision opens up new possibilities for the Church and other faith communities. Too often, Christian responses to climate change are framed in terms of stewardship or crisis response. An integral ecology of the cross reframes this moment not as a problem to solve but as a vocation to inhabit. Churches are called not just to reduce carbon footprints, but to become sanctuaries of interspecies communion, lament, and regenerative action. This could look like honoring indigenous land practices, creating ecological liturgies centered on fire, water, and soil, or reclaiming rituals of grief that hold space for ecological loss and planetary death.

In this vision, the cross stands at the center of the ecological imagination, not as an imposition but as an invitation. It asks us to step into the sacred work of *being-with*. With the more-than-human, with the wounded Earth, with the mystery of God in all things. This is not the end of the story, but its threshold. As fire clears the forest for new life, so does the cross open space for a reimagined world as a world grounded in communion, shaped by kenosis, and sustained by the shared pulse of life.

Conclusion: Performing Peace Beyond the Human

In the face of ecological collapse, climate grief, and the ongoing disintegration of the human-nature relationship, this paper has proposed a theological and phenomenological reorientation: an *integral ecology of the cross*. Drawing together the principles of integral ecology, particularly communion and subjectivity, with the Christian notion of kenosis and the phenomenological ethic of ecological intentionality, this framework seeks not only to reinterpret ecological crisis but to re-enchant it. To do so is not to diminish the suffering of species, land, and peoples, but to encounter that suffering with the tools of presence, humility, and sacred participation. It is to move from critique to communion, from despair to descent, from abstraction to embodiment.

The theology of the cross, so often misunderstood as merely transactional, finds new life when read through ecological and relational eyes. In its kenotic form, the cross becomes a site of deep relational transformation, an altar on which the human self is decentered, and through which divine solidarity with all of creation is enacted. In this light, the cross is not only a religious symbol but an ecological *pattern*. It is the fire that clears space for new growth. It is the self-offering that renews the whole. It is, as Whitehead might suggest, the place where the tragic beauty of the world is gathered into God, not erased but transfigured (Whitehead 1978, 517).

To walk the way of this cross is to enter into the "Great Work" that Thomas Berry speaks of. This is a work not of domination but of restoration, not of escaping the world but of rooting ever more deeply within it (Berry 1999, 3). It means rethinking salvation not as an escape from the Earth, but as the healing of Earthly relations. This salvific task cannot be accomplished through carbon credits or policy reforms alone, though such actions and intentions do matter. It

must also involve the cultivation of perception, the reformation of liturgy, and the transformation of the soul's relation to the more-than-human world.

Performing peace beyond the human means cultivating forms of practice that embody this vision. It means allowing fire to be a liturgy. It means letting forests teach theology. It means reconfiguring spiritual formation, including interspecies awareness, seasonal attentiveness, and deep grief work. Faith communities, particularly those rooted in sacramental traditions, are uniquely positioned to lead such a re-enchantment, not by imposing doctrine, but by facilitating presence. Imagine congregations planting trees as acts of repentance, holding vigils for extinct species, or integrating indigenous fire practices into their theological imagination. These are not sentimental gestures but sacramental responses to an aching world.

This vision also has implications for theology as an academic discipline. It challenges theologians to unlearn modes of thinking that separate heaven from Earth, soul from soil, salvation from kinship. It urges us to reframe theology not only as the study of divine things, but as the art of deep listening to wind, grief, fire, and the more-than-human voice of God. Such a theology will not always be comfortable. It will unsettle anthropocentric habits and theological certainties. But it will also give birth to something necessary: a way of thinking and living that honors complexity, affirms interdependence, and joins God in the work of reconciling all things.

Ultimately, an integral ecology of the cross invites us to *stay* and to remain with the world's pain without flinching, to remain in communion even when communion costs us something, to remain grounded even as the ground shifts beneath our feet. This staying is itself a form of worship. It is a resistance to the speed and abstraction of modern life, and a return to the sacred rhythms of attention and care.

In this kairotic moment, when so much is being lost and so much is still possible, the call is not to solve the world but to be present with it, to kneel with the burning bush, to listen with the forests, to grieve with the ocean. In this vulnerable, open, kenotic posture, a new world may yet be born. The cross, carried in this way, does not crush; it composts. And from its fertile ground, the seeds of peace beyond humans may begin to grow.

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