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REFLEXIONS - It was a very tall and very full tree, branches thick and thin. Ideal for cutting down to cook many meals and to warm many huts. But over the years, no one touched it, despite trees all around it having been cut down and the landscape left quite barren.

When asked why this tree had been preserved, one of the local Malawian villagers answered very directly and simply: “The spirits protect the tree, to help us draw water locally.” And yes, a closer look at the roots of the tree revealed a small spring that provided good fresh water. A further probe revealed that people of this local village and other villages in the area have a very strong cultural tradition of belief in a spirit-filled world. For instance, the people in the area believe that this particular tree shelters spirits which provide water for the communities around, offering good environmental protection for the people.

That recognition of a spirit-filled environment that is for the delight and the good of humans is central in *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis’s dramatic encyclical on the environment. Indeed, this is another way of expressing the message with which the Pope begins his encyclical. “In the words of this beautiful canticle, Saint Francis of Assisi reminds us that our common home is like a sister with whom we share our life and a beautiful mother who opens her arms to embrace us.”



We hope that *Laudato Si* can reinforce that good tradition in Malawi, a developing country that so very much needs environmental protection today. It is lack of protection from the impact of climate change that daily and substantially contributes to making Malawi one of the poorest countries in the world. (We personally know this as one of us assists village women to produce and promote use of energy efficient stoves that reduce use of wood fuel, and the other of us is working with a secondary school with a “green” commitment in both construction and instruction.) Indeed, Malawi is a poor country, ranking 174 out of 187 on the UN Human Development Index. But it is a peaceful country with a fairly lively democratic tradition and is very appropriately called “The Warm Heart of Africa.” Its future, however, is threatened by the major global phenomenon addressed in *Laudato Si*: environmental damages due to increasing

climate change.

Pope Francis's message should be well received in Malawi for two reasons: 1) it firmly acknowledges the reality of climate change and its close connection with human activities; and 2) it highlights in particular the need to respect and protect the dignity and lives of the poor, those most vulnerable to climate change, who are the majority of Malawians...

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