



World Forum on Theology and Liberation
Forum Mundial de Teologia e Libertação
Foro Mundial de Teología y Liberación
Forum Mondial de Théologie et Libération

LIBERATION *and the* **JUBILEE**

Contributions from the World Forum
on Theology and Liberation

Liberation and the Jubilee

Contributions from the World Forum on Theology and Liberation 2026

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Introduction

DEAN DETTLOFF
Canada

In Luke 4, Jesus opens his public ministry with a radical announcement. Unfurling the scroll of Isaiah, he takes the time to find a specific passage and reads:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to set free those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

He rolls up the scroll, sits down, and asserts: “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

Jesus’s ministry begins by saying the Jubilee Year is *now*. It is not locked away in a scroll or the past. The year of the Lord’s favor, the year of liberation, is present. A tradition that included the cancellation of debts, return of land, and freedom of slaves, the Jubilee names the moment of intervention, of economic turbulence for those who have accumulated wealth unjustly and economic justice for those who are being exploited.

The Jubilee message of liberation remains especially relevant today. According to the United Nations Commission on Trade and Development, 3.4 billion people live in countries that spend more money paying down the *interest*

of their debt than on either healthcare or education. Debt is also holding back investments in funding related to climate change, like adaptation, mitigation, and a just transition away from fossil fuels. Meanwhile, creditors continue to receive payments, increasing their profits as billions go without basic necessities.

Land remains one of the most stubborn sources of inequality and violence, as multitudes of people are shut out from their own traditional lands or the commons, increasingly crammed into urban spaces that lack resources and infrastructure for ensuring an equitable, safe, and healthy life. In addition to the ongoing appropriation and exclusion of centuries of colonialism, communities continue to be displaced by new enclosures for the sake of big agribusiness, new data centers to power AI and digital capitalism, and energy and extraction related to the so-called “green” transition.

And forced labor and severe exploitation continues, whether by preying on refugees and migrants, trafficking vulnerable persons, or simply maintaining the global economic conditions that generate constant and unnecessary poverty. Wealth continues to be transferred from the Global South to the Global North at dizzying speeds and scale, oppressing countries, people, and communities held down by the shackles of value chains.

In 2025, the Catholic Church marked an official Jubilee Year, an event that occurs every 25 years. Many social movements will recall that Jubilee 2000 became a galvanizing year for millions of people around the world to demand the cancellation of debts that were crushing the lives and futures of the global majority. Jubilee 2025 similarly saw social movements, churches, academics, organizations, and others coming together to demand justice related to debt, the climate crisis, land reform, food systems, and more.

Reflecting on this year of Jubilee, theologians involved with the World Forum on Theology and Liberation have written short reflections from their contexts that help continue to explore the theme of jubilee, keeping this door of liberation open beyond the calendar year of 2025. Some reflections are written without footnotes or references, allowing them to be accessible and used by lay readers to deepen engagement with the liberating ideas of jubilee. Others are more technical or scholarly, reflecting the interdisciplinary nature of liberation theology. All have been written to be readable and useful, especially in groups and communities of people seeking to connect faith and justice.

The World Forum on Theology and Liberation will continue to explore themes related to economic, political, and religious alternatives at the 2026 World Social Forum in Cotonou, Benin.

To learn more visit <https://www.wftlofficial.org>.

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JANUARY 2026

World Forum on Theology and Liberation

Straightening the ‘Bent’

A Feminist Theological Consideration of Economic and Ecological Debt in the Indian Context

KOCHURANI ABRAHAM
India

Economic debt is a marking feature of the marginalized sections of any given society. This is more evident in the context of developing countries or poorer nations of this world as the majority of people find themselves on the margins of the systems of power that give access to resources necessary for living life with dignity. Economic debt and ecological debt are deeply interrelated phenomena since degradation of the environment, exploitation of resources, and pollution are deeply linked to greedy profit making. For this reason, it is imperative that these are taken together while considering the “release from debts,” a key theme of the Jubilee Year 2025.

In the Indian setting, economic and ecological debt are both palpable realities, as the country is characterized by strong economic disparity between the super rich minority and the millions who are doomed to occupy the peripheries. The debt scenario is complex as both economic and ecological debts intersect with human identity markers such as caste, gender, and other factors that categorize humans as those belonging to the privileged classes and those who are the deprived lot, thereby attesting the observation that debt is widening disparities related to gender.

There is a maxim attributed to Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of independent India, which says: *“You can tell the condition of a nation by looking at the status of its women.”* This assertion is based on the reality that the situation of women would mirror the power dynamics underlying human relationships and the access to resources in any society. India’s dismal ranking of being 131 out of 148 countries (a slip from the 129th position in 2024) in the 2025

global Gender Gap Report, in spite of the country being a fast developing economy, unveils such a reality.

The deeper linkages between economic debt and ecological debt become evident in patriarchally inscribed contexts where women's bodies and the earth are commodified to serve capitalist interests. Ecofeminists like Anna Isla critique the processes of enclosure and appropriation on which capitalism is based, as these have led to the exploitation of nature and women. Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva see a strong connection between an escalation of sexual assaults on women and globalized capitalistic economic policies that unjustly violate the Earth. This is apparent in a country like India, where patriarchy is a defining feature of the social fabric, more so in the rural settings where girls and women continue to be bound by oppressive gender norms.

The anthropocentric and androcentric religious settings that position women and the earth on the lowest rungs of the gendered hierarchies tend to legitimize the many expressions of violence inflicted on both. The debt factor thrives in such a religious milieu which sees women's "earthy" bodies as impure and polluting. Denial of the subjectivity of both women and the earth negates their contribution to development that is sustainable, inclusive, and geared to the wellbeing of all.

It is in this context that we see how the story of Jesus straightening the "bent" woman (Lk 13: 10–17) becomes a symbolic and prophetic call that challenges the disciples of Christ to address the debt factor in the Jubilee Year. The setting of the story, with Jesus teaching in the synagogue on the Sabbath day, is important, as it is in a similar setting that Jesus proclaims his mission of bringing good news to the poor and making the captives free (Lk 4: 16–20). The story's focus on the women being bent for 18 years is also significant. "Bent," or "*ānāh*," means one who is diminished or deprived of the means/dignity to lead a full human life. The number 18 indicates bondage elsewhere in the Bible (Judges 3:14, 10:7–8), doubly emphasizing her marginalization. Jesus seeing her and setting her free on the Sabbath day, in spite of strong opposition on the part of religious leaders, points to the Kairos moments of God's intervention to liberate the oppressed from their bondage with a sense of urgency.

The "bent woman" of the Gospel story today symbolizes nations that continue to remain bent by the burden of both economic and ecological debt, even as they struggle to straighten up on a path of development that is inclusive and sustainable. The "bent" will be straightened when there is a political economy

that takes into consideration the gender and ethnic dimension alongside ecological concerns while engaging in struggles for global justice.

If we are to “turn debt into hope,” as campaigned by Caritas Internationalis, then straightening the “bent” people and the earth becomes imperative. A constructive response to this call is the challenge of the Jubilee Year!

KOCHURANI ABRAHAM, PhD, is a feminist theologian from India who engages with questions related to gender, sexuality, ecology, and spirituality in the academy and field for a liberative praxis.

Jubilee Justice

Open to a Bigger Picture

DAVID TUTTY
Australia

In November 2021, Simon Kofe, the foreign minister for the tiny Pacific nation of Tuvalu, stood knee deep in water as he addressed the participants of COP 26. He was unable to travel to the United Nations Climate Change summit in Glasgow because of COVID 19 restrictions, so he chose a creative way to highlight the urgency of his nation's plight.

Tuvalu, as with many other low-lying island nations, is experiencing a degree of sea-level rise that threatens the very existence of the country. Many parts of the Pacific are documenting a significant increase in high-tide flood days that seriously impact upon the future viability of the human communities that have lived there for centuries. Tuvalu, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Tonga, and many more nations suffer increasing flooding, coastal erosion, storm surges, salination of their soils, and loss of potable groundwater.

This reality is also experienced within one of the richest countries on earth: Australia. The Torres Strait Islanders are also significantly impacted by sea level rise. This impact is such that Indigenous leader Uncle Daniel Billy and others, in 2019, submitted a petition to the United Nations Human Rights Committee (UNHRC) challenging the Australian government's insufficient action on climate change.

The Torres Strait Islanders saw their family graves eroded to the extent that human remains were scattered. For these Indigenous peoples, this is about the heart of their culture. They argue that their traditional pattern of ongoing communication with their deceased relatives was being violated and that the Australian government has a responsibility to protect their cultural practices.

Uncle Daniel's submission also noted that the changes in the climate and the rainfall patterns led to increased damage to farming and fishing areas, reducing the amount of food available. The UNHRC concluded that the Australian government failed to address the destructive consequences of climate change, depriving them of the right to enjoy their own culture and interrupting their private, family, and home lives.

While Uncle Daniel and his colleagues won at the UNHRC, Uncle Pabai Pabai and Uncle Paul Kabai have since felt the need to submit a climate change class action case against the Australian government to the Federal Court of Australia. We still await the outcome.

The heart of the Jubilee tradition is about seeking justice. Many of us understand the need to seek right relationships among people we know, but both Jubilee and Pope Francis call us to see a bigger picture where our neighbour who needs justice can be far from us. Leviticus 25 and Pope Francis's encyclical *Laudato Si'* also require that we are just to the earth, that we are just to all parts of our common home. This Year of Jubilee seeks to open our eyes to the bigger picture and to see and to respond to needs we may not know.

The more we delve into the stories from Tuvalu, Kiribati, and the Torres Strait, the more we discover that the sea level rise, with which they struggle, is a direct result of climate warming. Simon Kofe from Tuvalu names that it is the carbon dioxide emissions from richer nations that are the cause of his country's plight. Tuvaluans have not done this to themselves. Kofe challenges richer nations to do more to limit climate change.

Pope Francis hears the cry of those from Tuvalu and from many other poorer countries that feel the impact of sea level rise. In *Laudato Si'*, he draws on a rich understanding of "ecological debt" to argue that those in richer countries have a responsibility for what is occurring in countries like Tuvalu. First formulated about 40 years ago, ecological debt recognizes that richer countries have consumed more than their fair share of our earth's resources and produced a disproportionate level of waste. These countries owe an ecological debt to poorer countries and Pope Francis challenges us to take this seriously.

Of course, the issues are far wider than just sea level rise. Increased and more severe flooding, bushfires, heatwaves, and loss of biodiversity are being experienced in both richer and poorer countries. Climate change and the increasing carbon dioxide emissions are impacting all people, and all flora and fauna on earth. Yet the richer nations have a far greater liability. An ecological

debt does exist and richer countries need to see the bigger picture and not just their own self interests.

Torres Strait elder, Dr. Togiab McRose Elu, known to many as Aunty Rose, is from Saibai Island just four kilometres from the Papua New Guinea mainland. Aunty Rose supports the ongoing climate change class action. “We are trying to make our voices, our knowledge and wisdom heard by those with the power and the responsibility to create change for the better,” she argues. “We must not give up hope. We have no more decades to make these changes.”¹

And hope is the key theme of this Year of Jubilee. So let us hope and let us act alongside wise leaders like Simon Kofe, Uncle Pabai and Aunty Rose.

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1. <https://australiainstitute.org.au/post/climate-change-action-from-the-top-western-torres-strait-dr-aunty-mcrose-elu>.

Jubilee 2025

A Subversive Proposal from the World's Impoverished

ALEJANDRO ORTIZ
Mexico

Since biblical times, the Jubilee has been a project of the poor and therefore a threat to systems of domination. Only the poor would find a Jubilee beneficial. A year for the land to rest and debts to be forgiven is good news for the impoverished, not for the powerful. Only they would come up with a year of total forgiveness. The prophets interpreted this initiative of the poor as something from God himself. And they were right, total forgiveness is from God.

Where the prophets proclaimed God's forgiveness the powerful failed to hear. There never was an initiative on the part of the empires that could be called a Jubilee. There was never a total forgiveness, there was no Jubilee for the poor, the indebted, the oppressed. Instead, we read in the sacred history that peasants were forced to abandon, or to sell, their land to resolve their debts, nevertheless becoming more indebted, poorer, and made to labour in their new owner's fields.

That is why it was necessary for someone to come and speak directly for God himself. And that was Jesus of Nazareth. Luke the evangelist, in his text that summarises Jesus's entire project (4:16–21), expresses this very well. Luke mentions the good news proclaimed by Jesus and states that he came for that purpose: to proclaim the year of grace (without violence). Jesus proclaims that it is time to forgive completely, not only because the poor need this, but God himself wants it; it is his desire, his will.

Jesus of Nazareth made this very clear in his characterization of the Kingdom of God. Jesus's actions, words, and prayers characterized total forgiveness as a sign of God's will. Along with sharing, forgiveness was first understood,

thanks to Jesus, as one of the acts that “constitutes” or defines God himself. In today’s parlance we would describe total forgiveness as constituting the DNA of the God of Jesus. He will say, “Forgive our sins as we forgive our debtors.” In other words, at the very heart of Jesus of Nazareth’s liberating proposal is total forgiveness, and as it is essential in the life of Christians, we ask for it and give it, totally.

Where one might have hoped Christian nations, governments, and the wealthy would proclaim years of grace for their people, for the poor, and for workers, this would not be the case. As in the parable of the ungrateful tenants (Mark 21:33–41), when the son of the vineyard’s owner comes to remind the tenants to whom the land belonged, the tenants killed him.

The scriptures introduced the Jubilee as a beautiful ideal, a fully human and humanitarian proposal, a way to worship God as he truly desires, but unfortunately it has never been realized that way. What is more, its core message represented a threat for the wealthy and powerful, who would do everything in their power to ensure that it never occurs.

The question is, why continue to think about the Jubilee today, after 2025? Can its promise be fulfilled in today’s world? Is it possible to forgive the world’s debts?

I don’t think so. The idea of a Jubilee that forgives debts is non-viable, particularly when one takes today’s geopolitical realities into account.

We live in selfish and economically violent times, more anti- than pro-Jubilee. In reality, debts are not being cancelled, they are increasing. President Trump, a symbol of global power, is raising tariffs and waging wars; there is no good news to give. Trump is the anti-gospel, that is, he only knows how to give bad news; he is bad news personified. And the worst thing is that he says it in religious language. He thinks he was saved from an assassination attempt because God has him as his prophet, making America great again.

And it is precisely because of this that we must speak of the Jubilee as a guiding inspiration, knowing that it becomes a utopia that guides our struggle and our protests. The Jubilee becomes a guiding light that inspires and motivates us to say that God does not want the current circumstances and that we must stop them. We must stop the collapse of civilization that we have created, we must stop the socio-environmental crisis, economic impoverishment, and inequality; we must stop this culture of death immediately. Wars were created to hasten the death of the poor, not to defend their lives and dignity. The Jubilee, then, becomes dangerous once again.

Demanding, calling, and protesting in the streets for a Jubilee is not an option, it is a prophetic necessity. We must do so to recover the invisible desire of the impoverished for a “new start,” a world in which the poor are not slaves to crippling debt. It is to remember once again that the essence of God is total forgiveness, and that is what all of us Christians should be fighting for. The Jubilee would mean a new beginning for everyone, which is what the Earth needs in order to recover. It would mean a new beginning, and it would be a major criticism of capitalism. The Jubilee would then become Hope: the hope for a new world, now.

ALEJANDRO ORTIZ *is a Latin American theologian and coordinator for Amerindia Continental. He is a member of the international executive committee of the World Forum on Liberation Theology.*

‘There Shall Be No Poor Among You’

The Jubilee as a Vision of the Future

GILIO BRUNELLI
Canada

The Israelites, originally nomadic tribes wandering in the vast territory stretching from Mesopotamia to the shores of the Mediterranean, were unable to immediately settle in the Promised Land to carry on their ancestors’ pastoral way of life when they left Egypt. When they did finally arrive in the Promised Land they experienced a fundamental change in their way of life (settled as opposed to nomadic) in territories assigned to eleven of the twelve founding tribes¹ with agriculture as their main mode of production. Shortly afterwards, the monarchy—bitterly contested by the prophets, who believed that only the Lord was and should remain the master of Israel—was established, thus completing Israel’s transformation from egalitarian nomadic pastoralists into sedentary farmers living in an increasingly hierarchical society.

This historical and social context helps one understand the Jubilee as an institution and a form of Israelite resistance to excessive accumulation and the imposition of a hierarchical structure. The Jubilee was an effort to remain egalitarian. Several of the Jubilee provisions, like the remission of debts, the freeing of slaves, the redistribution of land, etc., had the immediate effect of re-establishing a certain level of equality between the members of Israelite society. Thus, the biblical principle that “there shall be no poor among you”

1. The Levi tribe did not have its own territory, because its portion was the Lord’s portion, which in practice meant that the needs of its members were met by the other eleven tribes in accordance with predetermined rules set out in the book of Deuteronomy.

(Deut 15:4) can only be understood, and put into practice, if one acknowledges that the Lord gave the Promised Land and its wealth to Israel as a whole and not to each of its members individually. It is to this initial—indeed foundational—equality of the people of Israel that the Jubilee refers.

While not as codified as the Israelites' in Deuteronomy, norms intended to preserve an egalitarian society are not unique to ancient Israel and can be found, in different forms, among many populations throughout the world. Funeral ceremonies in Africa, the feasts of patron saints in Central America, and sumptuous weddings in India, to name but a few, are all celebrations in which the wealthiest families in the village have to invite the entire population and feed them, often for several days, and shower them with gifts. In economic terms, these celebrations are in effect redistribution schemes, as they result in a certain impoverishment of the wealthiest families and a certain social levelling.²

Closer to my own home in Canada, the potlatch practiced by some Amerindian populations on the Pacific Northwest Coast, notably the Tlingit and Kwakiutl, is also a form of redistribution and economic levelling. On certain occasions, like births, marriages and deaths, but also celebrations of alliances and treaties or the reestablishment of relations between neighbouring lineages, goods that had been accumulated by a family/lineage over many years were either destroyed or distributed to the entire tribe and to neighbouring tribes in very large quantities: furs, canoes, food, wooden crockery, and, later, blankets, guns, metal tools, etc. It is worth noting that the abundance of resources available on the Pacific Northwest Coast had led to a nascent social stratification and the emergence of a hereditary aristocracy parallel to the situation that the Israelite Jubilee intended to counter. While the potlatch could not counter the emergence of an aristocracy, it could slow down the accumulation of wealth and serve as an instrument of equalization, at least temporarily, like the Jubilee in ancient Israel.

In terms of analysis, it should be noted that distributions in these potlatch celebrations involve consumer goods, which, while beneficial, do not in their own right alter the social structure, because the means of production

2. However, the present-day separation between the economic and political spheres means that while, on the one hand, such a spending “impoverishes” donors, on the other hand it enhances their prestige and results in a consolidation of their “political” power.

are not affected. Therefore, the redistribution of these goods does not change the structures that promote accumulation and generate social stratification. A somewhat analogous challenge had to be dealt with by ancient Israel when moving out of pastoralism and into agriculture as a main mode of production. The redistribution of consumer goods—care for the poor, the widows, the orphans, and the strangers, in biblical terms—was not sufficient anymore to preserve an egalitarian society. Since land in an agrarian society is a major factor of production, its periodical distribution by the Israelites had the potential to counteract social stratification and accumulation. The liberation of slaves also had this potential because slaves were also a factor of production. That is the Jubilee. However, other economic mechanisms—particularly debt accumulated over time—in turn cancelled out the egalitarian impact of the redistribution of land and the freeing of slaves. Hence the need to periodically step backwards (or forwards, if one prefers), which is the rationale for the repetition of Jubilee every so many years.

It is interesting to note that some populations in Polynesia and Melanesia have incorporated roles and rules into their social organization that limit the accumulation of the means or factors of production and have been able to maintain their egalitarianism right up to the present day. With the pig as the main source of wealth and prestige in these societies, the Big Man's social influence is based on the number of pigs he owns. The Big Man must grow exceptionally copious quantities of yams to feed his pigs and must work assiduously to expand his vegetable garden as his herd multiplies. However, there are limits on the size of his garden, notably his time and energy. From a certain point onwards, the Big Man needs to give pigs to other men who cannot accumulate the large number of pigs that he can, due to their own limited time and energy. In effect, the possibility of accumulation is limited, and society remains fundamentally egalitarian. Hired labour, slave labour, and other mechanisms to increase accumulation are not to be found among these populations!

In light of the practices of ancient Israel, and the examples that we have briefly sketched, it could be said that there seems to be a resistance to the accumulation of goods at the core of egalitarian societies, as this necessarily leads to social stratification and ultimately to the appearance of its ultimate expression, the state. Even if, in their opposition to the establishment of a monarchy, the prophets of ancient Israel insisted that they had the primacy of the Lord at heart, practically speaking it was in fact an egalitarian society that they wanted to preserve, not only because all of its members were

fundamentally equal before the Lord, but also because everyone would enjoy similar economic conditions and rights. They were therefore the heralds of a society undivided between rich and poor, between the dominant and the dominated. Not far from ancient Israel, and perhaps at the same time, in Mesopotamia, often considered one of the cradles of both agriculture and state, the same struggle was going on: structures that were far from the fruit of a peaceful and consensual social transformation but reflected the first incarnations of the state were being imposed on the local population against their will.³ On the other side of the planet, in Amazonia, traditional Amerindian populations have resisted and continue to resist accumulation and social stratification to the point of them being considered not just societies without the state, but as societies *against* the state.⁴

Far from being a set of measures that plunge us back into a rather mythical golden age, the Jubilee is a project that propels us into a future of justice and equality where, as the prophets advocated, “There will be no poor among you” (Deut 15:4). In today’s global system of accumulation, the Jubilee vision of an egalitarian society continues to pose a radical challenge. The sharing of accumulated wealth demands structural changes to the present financial, economic, and political system. Cancelling unjust and unsustainable debts, transforming the relationships of production, and uprooting the causes of inequality are among the first necessary steps. That would be a good starting point, but as peoples around the world have done and struggle to keep doing, societies of generosity, equality, and care are the ultimate goal of the Jubilee.

GILIO BRUNELLI, *an anthropologist by training, has spent many years working with several indigenous peoples in the Amazon. In Canada, he led Development and Peace’s international department until 2018, and is currently teaching at Université de Sherbrooke, and consulting on international development.*

3. See James C. Scott, *Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2017).
4. See Pierre Clastres, *La Société contre l’État: Recherches d’anthropologie politique* (Paris: Les Éditions de minuit, 1974). Published in English as Pierre Clastres, *Society against the State: Essays in Political Anthropology*, trans. Robert Hurley and Abe Stein (New York: Zone Books, 1989).

Jubilee Year 2025

Its Relevance to the Philippines

RUBEN C. MENDOZA
Philippines

When a Jubilee Year is celebrated by the Roman Catholic Church, many Filipino Catholics ordinarily think of it as a time of spiritual renewal and rightly so. They consider going to pilgrimages, entering through Holy Doors, and receiving the sacrament of reconciliation and indulgences. However, there seems to be a tendency to forget the Old Testament roots of the Jubilee celebration, particularly with regard to debt cancellation, the release of slaves, and rest for the land. In my view, as part of an individual's and the church's spiritual renewal, there is a need to rediscover them in ways that are relevant to contemporary Filipinos. It is vital that one sees the Jubilee tradition with the interests and well-being of the poor in mind. As the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines asserts, the poor "are blessed because their poverty has historically been the privileged place of the gracious intervention of God's saving grace."¹ It is this "turn" that I'd like to focus on in this short reflection.

Debt Cancellation

At present, the Philippine government has a debt of ₱16.31 trillion² at the

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1. Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, *Acts and Decrees of Second Plenary Council of the Philippines*, 123, <https://cbcponline.net/acts-and-decrees-of-pcp-2/>.
 2. For reference, US\$1 = ₱56.748 (Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas, 16 July 2025, <https://www.bsp.gov.ph/sitepages/statistics/exchangerate.aspx>).

end of January 2025.³ Domestic debt accounts for 67.9% while foreign obligations comprise 32.1%. From January-May 2025, the Philippine government has paid ₱702.968 billion for its debt.⁴ We need to consider these figures in light of the budget allocations by the Philippine government for other sectors. For example, the 2025 budget for education is ₱1.05 trillion but the government included in this amount the allocations for institutions that are not considered part of basic or tertiary education, as a way of making it appear that education received the biggest chunk of the national budget. The Department of Health (DOH) has a ₱267.8 billion budget, the Department of Agriculture has ₱237.4 billion, and the Department of Social Welfare and Development has an allocation of ₱217.5 billion.⁵ With regard to the budget of the DOH, the legislature scrapped the proposed ₱74 billion state subsidy for the Philippine Health Insurance Corporation (PhilHealth),⁶ which administers the National Health Insurance Program. The legislators reasoned that PhilHealth has ample reserve funds even though the amount that PhilHealth provides is not enough to meet the health needs of the poor.

As one can see, a big part of the national budget goes to debt servicing. The amount that the government has so far paid is close to the allotted annual budget for health, social welfare and agriculture combined, sectors which actually are in need of a much higher budget in light of the needs of Filipinos, to wit:

There are inadequate health services for the poor. About half of the population do not have timely access to primary healthcare facilities.⁷ We also have a shortage of

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3. Ted Cordero, “PH Opens 2023 with Record High ₱16.31 Trillion Sovereign Debt,” 4 March 2025, <https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/topstories/nation/938135/ph-opens-2025-with-record-high-p16-31-trillion-sovereign-debt/story>.
 4. Bureau of the Treasury, <https://www.treasury.gov.ph/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Debt-Indicator-May-2025.pdf>.
 5. Presidential Communications Office, “Education Remains Top Priority in P6.32T Nat’l Budget,” 30 December 2024, https://pco.gov.ph/news_releases/education-remains-top-priority-in-p6-32t-natl-budget.
 6. Kenneth Christiane L. Basilio, “PHL’s 2025 Budget Law Faces Legal Challenges,” 26 January 2025, <https://www.pids.gov.ph/details/news/in-the-news/phl-s-2025-budget-law-faces-legal-challenges>.
 7. Hana Bordey, “Half of Filipinos Can’t Access Primary Healthcare Facilities in 30 mins. – DOH,” 29 April 2021, <https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/topstories/nation/785638/half-of-filipinos-can-t-access-primary-healthcare-facilities-within-30-mins-doh/story>.

doctors and nurses. According to the DOH, it will take 12 years to solve the shortage of nurses and 23 years for doctors.⁸

There is a crisis in the education sector. The tests of the Programme for International Student Assessment have shown that Filipinos have fared poorly in Reading, Math and Science.⁹ There is a shortage of classrooms and teachers in the Philippines. According to the Department of Education, there is a need for more than 165,000 classrooms and given the current budget, it will take more than 20 years to resolve the issue.¹⁰ Even if the current budget allows for the hiring of more teachers, there is still a shortage of 30,000 of them.¹¹

The farming and fishing sectors are the poorest in the country. The highest incidence of poverty is among them.¹² 30.6% of fisherfolks and 30% of farmers have incomes lower than the official poverty threshold. That says a lot since that threshold was set at a ridiculously low ₱13,873 per month for a family of 5.¹³ It is no wonder the children of farmers, seeing how their parents struggle, would choose to do something else rather than become farmers themselves.

The Philippines experiences a lot of natural hazards annually, which lead to many deaths and the destruction of property. They also displace thousands of people from their homes. According to UNICEF, “9.7 million children in the Philippines

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8. Gabriel Pabico Lalu, “DOH: It Will Take 12 Years for PH to Solve Shortage of Nurses, 23 Years for Doctors,” 4 May 2023, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1764748/doh-it-will-take-12-years-for-ph-to-solve-shortage-of-nurses-23-years-for-doctors>.
 9. Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, “PISA 2022 Results (Volume I and II) - Country Notes: Philippines,” https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/pisa-2022-results-volume-i-and-ii-country-notes_ed6bcc5-en/philippines_a0882a2d-en.html.
 10. “Philippines’ Classroom Shortage May Take 20 Years to Resolve,” 30 January 2025, <https://www.rappler.com/philippines/classroom-shortage-slow-construction-edcom-2-report>.
 11. Delon Porcalla and Bella Cariaso, “DepEd: Shortage of teachers Still at 30,000.” 21 May 2025, <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2025/05/21/2444622/deped-shortage-teachers-nationwide-still-30000>.
 12. Philippine Statistics Authority, “Fisherfolks and Farmers Remain to Have the Highest Poverty Incidences Among the Basic Sectors in 2021,” 24 March 2023, <https://psa.gov.ph/content/fisherfolks-and-farmers-remain-have-highest-poverty-incidences-among-basic-sectors-2021>.
 13. Ted Cordeo, “Who Is Poor? Here’s How PSA Classifies Poverty Among Filipinos,” 15 August 2024, <https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/money/economy/917209/who-is-poor-here-s-how-psa-classifies-poverty-among-filipinos/story>.

were displaced by environmental hazards from 2016 to 2021—the highest in the world.”¹⁴ If we are to consider the needs of those who are adversely affected by monsoons and typhoons with their long-term impacts, there is arguably a great need for social services.

What if the Philippines’ debt servicing is cut by half and the budget goes to the sectors above? What if our government is able to break free from its neo-liberal mindset and prioritize the needs of the poor? What if our creditors condone our debt, especially those that were pocketed by government officials? As our government grapples with its debt burden and its consequences of not being able to fund necessary services, it also must deal decisively with the issue of corruption since it eats up at least 20% of the national budget.¹⁵

Pope Francis appealed to rich nations for the cancellation of debts. For him, it is not only a question of generosity but a matter of justice. After all, “a true ‘ecological debt’ exists, particularly between the global North and South, connected to commercial imbalances with effects on the environment and the disproportionate use of natural resources by certain countries over long periods of time.”¹⁶ This “ecological debt” can also be said of local creditors who have enriched themselves at the expense of the country, enjoying the “disproportionate use of natural resources.”

Release of Slaves

“According to the 2023 Global Slavery Index, an estimated 7.8 in every thousand people were in modern slavery in [the] Philippines at any point in 2021. In other words, 859,000 people experienced forced labour or forced marriage in [the] Philippines in 2021. In terms of prevalence of modern slavery, [the] Philippines ranks 36th globally and 7th within Asia and the Pacific.”¹⁷ The

14. UNICEF, “Climate, Environments and Resilience,” emphasis in the original, <https://www.unicef.org/philippines/climate-environment-and-resilience>.

15. Zdravko Llubas, “Graft Gobbles 20% of Budget,” 19 August 2019, <https://www.occrp.org/en/news/graft-gobbles-20-of-the-philippines-budget>.

16. Pope Francis, *Spes Non Confundit*, 16, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/bulls/documents/20240509_spes-non-confundit_bolla-giubileo2025.html.

17. Walk Free, “Modern Slavery in the Philippines: Global Slavery Index 2023 Country Snapshot,” <https://cdn.walkfree.org/content/uploads/2023/09/27165126/GSI-Snapshot-Philippines.pdf>.

forms of modern slavery in the country are forced labor, sex trafficking, online child sexual exploitation and abuse, child labor and trafficking, scam operators in Philippine offshore gaming operators and exploitation of overseas Filipino workers.¹⁸ Much work needs to be done in the area of modern day slavery. The poverty and illiteracy of so many of the victims make them vulnerable to manipulation and exploitation.

Rest for the Land

The assessment of IBON, a non-profit organization, of the Philippine environment is damning and alarming: “The environment is in a critical state, degraded hugely by destructive and extractive profit-motivated activities of foreign and local corporations, oligarchs, politicians, officials, and certain individuals. Their operations have been ushered by government policies no less, which are neoliberal, pro-foreign, pro-business, anti-environment, and anti-people.”¹⁹ The sad reality is that the neoliberal ideology, consistently criticized by the late Pope Francis, is the dominant economic framework of the Philippines. In that framework, the environment is seen merely as a means of profit, even if the business practices, such as mining and logging, have led to the continuing loss of ecological integrity. Regrettably, “Logging, mining, corporate plantations, and other extractive activities have eaten at the forest cover of the Philippines, which has diminished to just 7 million hectares as of 2015, or just 23.3% of the country’s land area. According to environment scientists, this is ecologically unhealthy and critical given the country’s geography and terrain, which should sustain a 54% forest cover.”²⁰ The Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines rightfully observed way back in 1988, “All the living systems on land and in the seas around us are being ruthlessly exploited. The damage to date is extensive and, sad to say, it is often irreversible.” That was why the bishops issued the challenge, “As Filipinos we can and must act now. Nobody else will do it for us. This is our home; we must care for

18. Free the Slaves, “Modern Slavery in the Philippines: A Closer Look,” <https://freetheslaves.net/modern-slavery-in-the-philippines-a-closer-look>.

19. IBON Foundation, “A Glimpse at the Critical State of the Philippine Environment,” 27 April 2020, <https://www.ibon.org/a-glimpse-at-the-critical-state-of-the-philippine-environment>.

20. IBON Foundation, “A Glimpse at the Critical State of the Philippine Environment.”

it, watch over it, protect it and love it. We must be particularly careful to protect what remains of our forests, rivers, and corals and to heal, wherever we can, the damage which has already been done.”²¹ In the effort to protect the environment, Filipinos must be guided by the vision that “the commitment to work for justice and to preserve the integrity of creation are two inseparable dimensions of our Christian vocation to work for the coming of the kingdom of God in our times.”²²

The Jubilee Year is a call to begin anew. It is a challenge to have a right relationship with God, with one another and with all of creation. It invites us to change our present world order and create one that is in accordance with God’s justice. It is a summons to reformat our world, so to speak, to make our “apps”—the structures and systems of our society—just and responsive to the needs of the poor. It calls on us to remove the “viruses” and “malwares” of our common home—attitudes and values that prevent us from living a fully human life in solidarity with one another and with the whole of God’s creation. Another world, with God’s grace, is possible!

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21. Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines, “What Is Happening to Our Beautiful Land?,” 29 January 1988, <https://cbcponline.net/what-is-happening-to-our-beautiful-land>.

22. Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines, “What Is Happening to Our Beautiful Land?”

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