



Mercy Global Action: Presence to Earth

Colleen Swain (Americas): 'Reborn from the Ashes'

Earlier this month, I woke up to see the sun rise over the Atlantic Ocean; the forecast predicted a clear sunny day. However, what I experienced was something unexpected. I expected to see the yellow sun break through the horizon as the waves rolled in, something so beautiful yet many times taken for granted. But that day I experienced a dim red sun rise over a dark hazy sky, a sky that was shrouded in smoke. It wasn't until I saw the news that morning that I understood what I was experiencing here, on the East Coast of the United States, was a result from the wildfires on the West Coast thousands of miles away.

This year in the United States, 3.7 million acres have been destroyed by wildfires.¹ My sisters and brothers in Australia began 2020 with this same fate, and last year, wildfire devastation reigned across the Amazon and even parts of the Arctic.

Yet there is a paradox—something I learned more about during this summer when I had the opportunity to explore some of the National Parks in the United States. In 1988, Yellowstone National Park experienced five wildfires destroying 36% of the entire park.² Despite the destruction, it gave scientists and the community the opportunity to understand the role of fire in some of the most unique ecosystems in the world.

During wildfires, despite mass devastation to life, nutrients from the dead trees are returned to the soil. This exposes the forest floor to more sunlight, and allows seedlings that have been released by the fire to sprout and grow, a process known to scientists as ecological succession. What I didn't realize was how relevant the wildfires and this transformation has shaped my own ecological succession, and ultimately, my presence to Earth during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In Christine Valters Paintner's book "Water, Wind, Earth, and Fire: The Christian Practice of Praying with the Elements" she emphasizes the "*paradox of destruction and renewal...[seeing the] cycle of death and new life here*"³.

So I reflected and prayed. COVID-19 has had this paradoxical effect of fire in our own lives. Times that we may feel like a fire has raged through our lives, destroying what we have held dear. Isaiah 48:10 states "See, I have refined you, but not like silver. I have tested you in the furnace of adversity". Times of suffering have the tendency to remind us what is most vital. Halting us to a point of distinction and understanding, a process of refinement and purification giving us the opportunity to be born again from the ashes.

¹ National Interagency Fire Center. "National Preparedness Level 5." September 25, 2020 <https://www.nifc.gov/fireInfo/nfn.htm>

² National Park Service. "1988 Fires". US Department of the Interior. August 27, 2020 <https://www.nps.gov/yell/learn/nature/1988-fires.htm>

³ Paintner, Christine Valters *Water, Wind, Earth, and Fire: The Christian Practice of Praying with the Elements*. Indiana: Sorin Books, 57

We have been forced to stop, to be present to this time and those around us and how we are all connected. Even more so, it has allowed renewed attention to Creation and our presence to and on Earth; truly revealing the sacredness of Earth among us.

Mercy International Association's recent publication, 'Hope in a Time of Pandemic – Responding to COVID-19 through a Mercy Lens', captured the experiences of Mercy Sisters, Associates and Partners across the world and how they have contemplated and embraced integral ecology and indigenous wisdom during this time. A Mercy Sister from Newfoundland shared:

We are being graced with a moment of planetary significance, this time coming from the microcosm that forms the web of existence as we know it. A virus is letting us know that everything is connected, from the non-living to the living, from the rich to the poor, from the first world to the fourth. The task that lies before us is to first acknowledge the need to respect and protect the unity of that web of life by creating and preserving a balance in the seas, rivers, soil, and air.”⁴

This is the call for us all globally; we cannot forget this presence we have felt amongst the stillness. We must respond with moral integrity to the wisdom of Earth and continue to feel her presence. Human activity has subjected Earth to relentless devastation inhibiting Earth's sustainability and the flourishing of life. Earth has called us to witness our connection. We grow. We burn. We are transformed, reborn from the ashes and heal together.

During this five year anniversary of Pope Francis' encyclical “Laudato Si’: On Care of our Common Home”, the one year anniversary of the Synod on the Amazon and the climate strikes across the globe, we are reminded of the unified call to protect Earth against environmental degradation. We cannot forget that the Amazon was in flames while the Synod took place. Miguel H. Diaz, previous US Ambassador to the Holy See, wrote in an article entitled “Our Common Home is Burning” that

“Our failure to protect our planet increasingly deepens the divide between rich and poor, having the greatest impact on already vulnerable populations... Fire has often been used in the Christian tradition as a symbol of life and vitality. Seen from this perspective, we could call for “fire” to burn in our house. But let's be perfectly clear: our house cannot burn as a result of human ideologies mainly driven by economic profit.”⁵

Reverend Dr. Peter Savastano, Associate Professor at Seton Hall University, wrote in “Merton and Indigenous Wisdom” that Thomas Merton's first step toward reigniting the sacred fire in his own life was “divesting his mind from the prison of his ethnocentric, imperialistic attitudes and beliefs...”⁶ This is necessary in our own ecological conversions,

⁴ Mercy International Association - Global Action. *Hope in a Time of Pandemic: Responding to COVID-19 Through a Mercy Lens* August 18, 2020. <https://www.mercyworld.org/f/45074/x/e3711034bd/f-covid-guide-web.pdf>

⁵ Diaz, Miguel H. “Our ‘Common Home’ is Burning”. National Catholic Reporter. September 10, 2019 <https://www.ncronline.org/news/earthbeat/theology-en-la-plaza/our-common-home-burning>

⁶ Savastano, Peter. “Merton and Indigenous Wisdom”. Fons Vitae Publishing. Louisville, Kentucky. 2019 <https://fonsvitae.com/product/merton-indigenous-world-wisdom/>

or our 'Great Turning'⁷ as described by Joanna Macy. Our mind must be open to be transformed by nature, towards mutuality and sustainability.

Right before the Synod opened, millions marched around the world chanting "our house is on fire"⁸ after Greta Thunberg courageously spoke to world leaders at the World Economic Forum in Davos. While also relating to the increase in wildfires globally⁹, Greta drew attention to the increase in global temperatures due to climate change. A failure for governments to act urgently to reduce carbon emissions, will result in dire consequences threatening our civilization and ecosystems across the globe.¹⁰

Throughout the Mercy World, Sisters, Associates and Partners are experiencing effects of climate change in various ways, through: wildfires, sea level rise, devastating typhoons, water scarcity and more. While both individually and collectively working to adopt measures to curb our carbon emissions, we have continued to advocate at local, national and international levels. Mercy Global Action has brought the experiences and best practices of the Mercy World as key advocacy points to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change Conference of Parties¹¹ where the future of the Paris Agreement is being negotiated.

The Mercy World's unique voice at international forums both unite and evoke presence to Earth at many levels. In the ways in which we commit to an Integral Ecology; advocate for the rights of nature and people over economic profit; oppose the misuse of resources and extractivism, encourage eco-system based solutions and incorporate the local knowledge of communities; and ultimately, recognize this time as an opportunity for regeneration, to promote resilience and a resolve not to return to what was once 'normal'.

This is our call. To be present to Earth and be reborn from the ashes in ways that are inclusive and ensure the flourishing of Earth.

⁷ Macy, Joanna. "The Great Turning". The Center for Ecoliteracy. June 29, 2009 <https://www.ecoliteracy.org/article/great-turning>

⁸Thunberg, Greta. "'Our house is on fire': Greta Thunberg, 16, urges leaders to act on climate". Indigenous Peoples Major Group for Sustainable Development. 2019. <https://indigenouspeoples-sdg.org/index.php/english/all-global-news/950-our-house-is-on-fire-greta-thunberg-16-urges-leaders-to-act-on-climate#:~:text=News24-,'Our%20house%20is%20on%20fire'%3A%20Greta%20Thunberg%2C%2016%2C,leaders%20to%20act%20on%20climate&text=Our%20house%20is%20on%20fire.,able%20to%20undo%20our%20mistakes.>

⁹ Dunne, Daisy. "Explainer: How climate change is affecting wildfires around the world". Carbon Brief, July. 14, 2020 <https://www.carbonbrief.org/explainer-how-climate-change-is-affecting-wildfires-around-the-world>

¹⁰ IPCC, 2018: Global Warming of 1.5°C. An IPCC Special Report on the impacts of global warming of 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels and related global greenhouse gas emission pathways, in the context of strengthening the global response to the threat of climate change, sustainable development, and efforts to eradicate poverty [Masson-Delmotte, V., P. Zhai, H.-O. Pörtner, D. Roberts, J. Skea, P.R. Shukla, A. Pirani, W. Moufouma-Okia, C. Péan, R. Pidcock, S. Connors, J.B.R. Matthews, Y. Chen, X. Zhou, M.I. Gomis, E. Lonnoy, T. Maycock, M. Tignor, and T. Waterfield (eds.)]. In Press https://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/sites/2/2019/06/SR15_Full_Report_High_Res.pdf

¹¹ United Nations Climate Change. 2020 United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. 2020 <https://unfccc.int/>