



Today, Sisters of Mercy, through Mercy International Association, use their resources to respond to issues of global poverty demonstrated in the massive displacement of persons worldwide.

READING for Religious Life: A Deep down Impulse to Care and Make Creation Whole

Vow of Poverty

Week One: Watering the Roots at the Wellspring of Mercy, June 2-7, 2013

Presenter: Marie Chin rsm (Americas)

(Excerpts from Sallie McFague's MODELS OF GOD, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987)

While the threat of nuclear extinction has not disappeared, a new one has emerged: ecological deterioration. Ecological deterioration is subtle and gradual: it involves the daily, seemingly innocuous, activities of every person on the planet It affects the human population along lines of class, race, and gender. ...Like addiction, ecological deterioration is insidious. We become used to the smell of automobile exhaust fumes and landfills ... habituated to tall trees being felled to make room for more office buildings, accustomed to children playing on city sidewalks devoid of grass and trees. ...Being in denial and distant from nature, we can and do refuse to acknowledge the insidious disease that is infecting the ecosystem that supports us all – from the microorganisms in the ocean to the human child. At most, we treat the problem like a bad cold that will eventually go away if we make a few minor life-style changes, such as recycling or car pooling.

There is no formula for planetary well-being. Ecology, most simply, means planetary “house rules,” knowledge of and obedience to the ways of living appropriately in our home, the earth. This sounds straightforward, but the more scientists discover about the incredible complexity of the interrelationships and interdependencies among the millions of species of plants and animals on the planet, as well as the myriad ways they interact with and depend upon soil, water,, chemicals, atmosphere, gases, temperature and so forth, the less certain they become about how we should act. We do not know enough, and we may never know enough, to prevent the ecological decay all around us.

And this is perhaps the key point: what if we cannot come up with a quick fix to the ecological crisis? If the flutter of a butterfly’s wings in the Amazon Basin can affect the weather in Kansas City, then no amount of technical know-how can solve the problem. The interrelationships are too deep and complex for [any] fix-it mentality. This is not to say that knowledge is useless or is not a part of the



Today, Sisters of Mercy, through Mercy International Association use their resources to respond to issues of global poverty demonstrated in the massive displacement of persons worldwide.

solution. Of course it must be, but it is perhaps even more essential to realize our proper relationship to our planet. One of the most critical house rules we must learn is that we not lords *over* the planet, but products of its processes; in fact, we are the product of a fifteen-billion-year history of the universe and a four-billion-year history of our hearth. We are an intimate and integral part of what we want to know: planetary knowledge is self-knowledge. Hence, ecological knowledge is not about something “out there”; it is about ourselves and how we fit into the scheme of things. The most important ecological knowledge we can have, then, is not how we can change the environment to suit us (a tactic that may, in the long run, be not only impossible but disastrous for ourselves and other species), but rather how we can adjust our desires and needs to what appear to be the house rules....Just as we may never know enough to change the environment to suit our desires, so we will probably never know enough even to fit in appropriately. In such a situation, restraint, doing less, pulling back, may be the better part of wisdom....to admit that we human beings have come up against our match – the planet itself- and cannot, must not, try to manage, control, and fix it, but instead ought to listen to it, learn from it, and restrain ourselves (our desire, projects, comforts, even our needs, as well a sour population) is very difficult. Not to act, but to abstain; not to control, but to “let be”; not to solve the problem, but to simplify one’s life; not to want more but to accept less; all this goes against the grain.

In a recent book on the economy and the environment, the authors conclude with these grim words:

On a hotter planet, with lost deltas and shrunken coastlines, under a more dangerous sun, with less arable land, more people, fewer species of living things, a legacy of poisonous wastes, and much beauty irrevocably lost, there is still the possibility that our children’s children will learn at last to live as a community among communities. Perhaps they will learn also to forgive this generation its commitment to ever greater consumption. Perhaps they will even appreciate its belated efforts to leave them a planet still capable of supporting life in community.

A sensibility of abstinence and restraint suggests that we assume an attitude of humility rather than of control, and realize that we are but one species in a world that, the better we know, the more complex, intricate, and mysterious we find to be.

What then to do? Participate in the vocation of the planetary agenda. Each of us has a calling, is being summoned, to put our talents, passion, and insights in planetary well-being. Ecology is not an



Today, Sisters of Mercy, through Mercy International Association, use their resources to respond to issues of global poverty demonstrated in the massive displacement of persons worldwide.

extracurricular activity; rather, it must be the focus of one's work, the central hours of one's day, however that is spent. The Planetary Agenda involves everything and everyone, everything because we now know that all things, all beginnings and processes on the planet, are interrelated, and that the well-being of each is connected to the well-being of the whole...calls us to do something unprecedented – to think about “everything that is.” Narrow, parochial agendas concerned with “me and my kind” not only go against our moral sense and religious traditions, but increasingly are seen to be against reality. We cannot save ourselves and our kind alone if salvation means the health and well-being of the planet and all its creatures The planetary agenda takes the wide and long view: it is concerned with the well-being of the diverse, rich plenitude of beings, human and nonhuman, that inhabit the planet, not just for the present and near future but, as Native American traditions insist, “for seven generations” or for as long as we can imagine. Increasingly recognizing the world as a tribal village at least as it refers to all human inhabitants of the earth. But that recognition needs to be extended to all other living creature and to the ecosystem that supports us all. As pictures of planet earth from space show us, we are all inhabitants of one space, one home, one finite, enclosed system. Our fate and our future are also one.

Sallie McFague