



Earth and Integral Ecology

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“Earth and Integral Ecology” is a huge topic, and since this reflection is limited to five (5) minutes, I will refrain from considering many sub-topics, and focus intently on the main and urgent action to which the Mercy Family is presently called: **integral ecological conversion**.

The Sisters of Mercy and the whole Mercy Family talk frequently about “conversion”. We may think we have already yielded to it; we may soften or limit its meaning, and think that we’ve “done it.”

But have we, in face of the current, widespread, and severe degradation of Earth and the cries of all its vulnerable life, really surrendered ourselves to the thorough ecological conversion that these realities demand? Or have we, so far, only tinkered around the edges, done a few necessary, but relatively convenient “ecological things” – recycled a few cans and plastic bags -- and then rested upon our oars?

Have we truly committed our personal and communal lives to the radical, ongoing ecological conversion that the current climate crisis requires? Do we treat this crisis as a *crisis*, as the most serious and far-reaching crisis Earth has ever known, the crisis whose magnitude and multiple facets cause so many of the other crises Earth’s peoples and her created life are now experiencing? For most of us, the truthful answer is probably No.

Let me say it flat out: What we need to embrace more vigorously is a profound *change* in the way we live our human and Mercy lives, a change in our minds, hearts, and human behavior. A change in the way we understand human life on this Earth, and in the way we

relate to all the created life and resources of this Earth—*this* twenty-first century Earth, not some now obsolete “Earth” we learned about in primary school.

As Pope Francis says in *Laudato Si’: On Care for Our Common Home*:

Many things have to change course, but it is *we human beings above all* who need to change. A great cultural, spiritual and educational challenge stands before us, and it will demand that we set out on the long path of renewal.

(art. 202)

The integral ecological conversion needed will involve both our ongoing repentance and our daily surrender to the Holy Spirit’s transforming action in our minds, hearts, and habits.

We will have to get over our spirit-matter dualism, our binary soul-body distinction, and our egocentrism that allow us to subjugate Earth below and separate from the Sacred and then to dominate and exploit Earth’s resources.

We will have to yield to the Gospel of Jesus of Nazareth as it speaks to us *today*, in the signs of *our* times.

We will have to read or re-read *Laudato Si’* and the UN Climate Change Reports, and acquire, no matter what our age, new ecological literacies and realizations.

We will have to reach out to and learn from interfaith, interreligious, and environmental organizations, and genuinely collaborate with them in petitions for ecological developments in our governments’ budgets and legislation.

We will have to persistently direct congregational money toward a commitment to renewable energy and divestment from fossil fuels.

We will have to boldly rouse to action our sponsored institutions, and our dioceses and parishes.

And we will have to examine and change—yes, change—*our own* consumerist, wasteful, unreflective, often even extravagant, lifestyles – our “collect selfishness,” as Pope Francis names it (*Laudato Si'*, art. 204).

Catherine McAuley did not know today's climate crisis and its related sufferings. She did not hear the precise “cry of the Earth and cries of the poor” that we hear. Therefore, she did not have a program of Mercy response that she could hand down to us.

But she did have some relevant insights into the breadth of “common life” inherent in our vows of poverty, and into the simplifying of our lives and the renunciations required by merciful sharing and respect for Earth and her vulnerable lives.

As she wrote in November 1840, “Let us never desire more than enough” (*CCMcA*, 366)—enough of anything. She would have agreed with Benedict XVI: “Purchasing is always a moral – and not simply economic -- act” (*Caritas et veritate*, art. 66).

Clare Moore tells us that at Baggot Street, “Everything purchased for the use of the Sisters was of the poorest and plainest kind, and she would never allow a large provision of anything to be laid in” (*CMcATM*, 114).

In 1838, when the poor school she had so wanted was closed by the parish priest, against her wishes, Catherine said of the neglected girls loitering on the roads in Kingstown: “God knows I would rather be cold and hungry than the poor in Kingstown or elsewhere should be deprived of any consolation in our power to afford” (*CCMcA*, 164).

Catherine knew what genuine solidarity is and what Samaritan living asks of us. And we can be confident that her continuing intercession for us, her ongoing pleading with and for us, is up-to-date, not limited to the needs she understood in the 1830s, before planet Earth began to collapse in its present degradation.

Yes, the ecological conversion of our personal and communal lifestyles to which we are currently called will pinch us. But do we really need a new couch and another set of dishes, another new blouse or necklace, another plastic gadget, movie, or dinner at a superior restaurant? Or is what we have “enough”? And where are *our* solar panels, windmills, and electric cars?

We probably need a new *Mercy theology*, new *Mercy language*, and new *Mercy images* to carry in our hearts as invigorating reminders of the thorough ecological conversion to which we are daily called. What about adopting an **Enough Theology**? What about making “**ecological conversion**” a constant theme in our daily contemplation? And what about setting firmly before our eyes and hearts the **ragged image of our half-dead Sister Earth** lying wounded and robbed on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho?

The Mercy Family has a long tradition of Keeping Vigil: staying prayerfully at the bedside of severely ill sisters, pleading with God to heal them.

Let us now take our dear wounded Earth and her suffering peoples to the Mercy Inn of our lives and homes. Let us kneel at her bedside, resolved to change our ways, and begging the Merciful Innkeeper to help us care for her.

Our poor, sick Earth and all her created life need this humble vigilance today, not when we “get around to it someday.” It may then be too late for healing