

Mercy Global Action: Faith Traditions and Mercy – Alternatives to Violence

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Bringing Together the Wisdoms of Indigenous Peoples and Faith Traditions

Mercy is found in a loving heart, crossing over all boundaries and part of every faith tradition. It gifts us with the capacity to listen with a deep reverence and respect to the suffering of wounded Earth and its vulnerable inhabitants. Tapping into the wisdom of Mercy offers a way in which anger and trauma can be dismantled, moving their power to a different space, a space where one comes to an appreciation of the goodness inherent in others and in Earth, thereby helping to heal divisions and restore peace and equanimity.

Today the acute cries for mercy and compassion from our Earth Home resound more loudly than ever before. Through human activity, the planet is being subjected to relentless devastation inhibiting Earth's sustainability and the flourishing of all life. Indigenous people tell us that we are losing the sense of the sacredness of all life and that from the magnitude of the desecration, damage and destruction of our planet we have moved beyond climate change to fears for survival.¹ To hear these cries of Earth and its inhabitants more clearly, humanity is called to develop a sensibility that will fashion within us compassionate and loving hearts to find alternatives to violence.

Many Indigenous Peoples through their spirituality sense the order and interconnectedness in all of creation. With their innate spiritual connection, they regard Earth as their Mother and they sense within a sacred obligation to be her caretakers and the protectors of her rich resources. In this role they do not see themselves as becoming owners or masters of Earth because for the Indigenous the Creator or Great Spirit is the creator of all things. They see themselves as living in kinship with all that exists. This respectful attitude toward Earth is certainly not at the forefront in the deliberations of governments and corporate decision-makers who, when dealing with resource development, too often seem to be more motivated by attitudes of dominance and control.

The wisdom of hearing the voices of Indigenous Peoples and of learning from them ways of listening to the cries of Earth has only recently come into our awareness. The United Nations has helped lead us on this path. Through its *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (UNDRIP) adopted in 2007, governments are encouraged to engage Indigenous peoples as co-equals in resource development approval.³ Rooted in this document is the specific right of free, prior and informed consent (FPIC),⁴ giving Indigenous People the right to give or withhold consent to a project that may negatively affect them or their territories.

The challenge is how to initiate dialogue in good faith that will enable proper consultation and cooperation with Indigenous Peoples. Such negotiations must be conducted in an atmosphere in which the right of the Indigenous to feel free and equal to all peoples is paramount. Tapping into this more merciful and just way of thinking and acting allows for an open, empathetic understanding and acceptance of the perspective of both traditions.

Not trusting this approach leads to feelings of betrayal and broken trust, resulting at times in the imposition of action leading to violence and repression.

Two recent examples – one local and one global – illustrate this new way which is rooted in faith traditions coming together and acting together. In 2012, the Provincial Government of Newfoundland and Labrador sanctioned the mega Muskrat Falls Hydroelectric Project which, according to the Indigenous People, was authorized on their ancestral land without FPIC. Their concerns included threats to their rights, culture and way of life; the potential for negative effects on their health due to increased methylmercury levels polluting water and food supplies of those living downstream; loss of their tradition of hunting and fishing and the unstable North Spur which could break and cause flooding. Seemingly without a clear understanding of a ‘one life’ system to which we all belong, both Federal and Provincial governments questioned not only the wisdom and knowledge of the Indigenous People about methylmercury but also studies done by Harvard University scientists confirming the thinking of the Indigenous People. After numerous non-violent and creative but unsuccessful demonstrations, these powerless people resorted to violence resulting in several arrests.

Government’s refusal to consider the concerns of the Indigenous peoples and the soaring cost of the project stirred action demanding an inquiry. Realizing the moral and ethical issues involved in this situation to which faith traditions could offer a broader and deeper dimension, the Sisters of Mercy Leadership, the Mercy Centre for Ecology and Justice, and the Area Council of Churches presented submissions to the Inquiry. Though it was considered too late to turn back, nevertheless, through the Inquiry, a larger picture of the alarming flaws involved in the various aspects of the project was exposed, supporting the indigenous position. Now steps are being taken to address at least some of these concerns.

The second example is occurring at the global level. The Amazon region is recognized as an area of critical importance in stabilizing global climate and, therefore, calls for high priority in protecting the biodiversity of the land and water. Like Indigenous People in Canada, the Indigenous peoples of the Amazon experience threats to their culture, their way of life and their health and well-being from illegal mining, deforestation, oil and gas exploitation and monoculture. These challenging situations are exacerbated by inept government structures and pressures brought to bear by powerful developers as the Indigenous struggle to protect the Amazon forest and fragile ecosystems from plunder.

Highlighting these concerns through the Synod on the Amazon, Pope Francis encouraged the protection of creation and respect for the integrity of the Indigenous Peoples, calling on Catholics and people of all faiths to defend the rights of the Amazon and the people. In his Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Amazon Region entitled *Querida Amazonia*, the Pope calls all faith traditions to respond:

In an Amazonian region characterized by many religions, we believers need to find occasions to speak to one another and to act together for the common good and the promotion of the poor. This has nothing to do with watering down or concealing our deepest convictions when we encounter others who think differently than ourselves. If we believe that the Holy Spirit can work amid differences, then we will try to let ourselves be enriched by that insight, while embracing it from the core of our own

convictions and our own identity. For the deeper, stronger and richer that identity is, the more we will be capable of enriching others with our own proper contribution (QA, #106).⁵

His plea to faith traditions is stated with deep eloquence (QA, #110), “How can we not struggle together? How can we not pray and work together, side by side, to defend the poor of the Amazon region, to show the sacred countenance of the Lord, and to care for his work of creation?”⁶

Listening to the wisdom of Indigenous Peoples and touching into the wisdom of diverse faith traditions, we will be co-creators with a merciful God in an evolving universe. We will find the conversion of heart needed to create paths of peace not violence, paths of hope not division, paths of mercy not destruction. Then together, we – the people and Earth – will truly know the fulness of life flowing from our belief that, “Mercy is the very heartbeat of God resonant in creation; the warmth that pulses through all things as the divine Mystery flows out into created form” (Cynthia Bourgeault).

Endnotes

1. *Indigenous Elders and Medicine Peoples Council Statement*, United Nations Convention on Climate Change, COP21 Paris, France, 2015. Accessed at <http://nativenewsonline.net/currents/indigenous-peoples-release-joint-statement-to-un-talks-in-paris-on-climate-change>.
2. *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, 2007. Accessed at <https://www.ictinc.ca/united-nations-declaration-on-the-rights-of-indigenous-peoples-snapshot>.
3. Ibid.
4. Pope Francis, *Querida Amazonia: Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation* (2020). Accessed at http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20200202_querida-amazonia.html.
5. Ibid.
6. Cynthia Bourgeault, *Mystical Hope: Trusting in the Mercy of God* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 2001): 31