



MERCY
GLOBAL
PRESENCE

Reflections at the Beginning of Segment Two- Month Two: Mercy and the Degradation of Earth

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“The land mourns, and all who live in it languish; together with the wild animals and the birds of the air, even the fish of the sea are perishing” (Hos 4:3). In segment two – month two of Mercy Global Presence, we reflect on *Mercy and the Degradation of Earth*.

Glimmers from Last Month’s Reflection

We have a strong foundation in the reflections of month one in the segment: *Faith Traditions and Mercy*. Each major faith tradition holds mercy as essential to its life, is a name for God, is one of the qualities of God lived by people every day and is integrally connected to creation and to Earth. The theologian Peta Goldberg says, “From within our ‘house of faith’ we are encouraged to reach out in order to intentionally and sympathetically interact with other systems of theological belief. If we do so, we open up the possibility of a richer appreciation of our own house of faith.” Two artists, Anne Reddington rsm and Maureen Murphy rsm, created a new work of art by juxtaposing a dramatic painting by Anne (*Table of MERCY*) and a deeply moving poem by Maureen (“Who are we if not kin?”).

At the ministry level, the CCASA Prophetic Voice Commission introduced us to the process *Alternatives to Violence*, a program that seeks to form community by teaching conflict resolution through non-violent communication, respect for oneself and others, self-esteem and thinking before acting. Through a global lens, Mary Tee rsm showed a practical application of a participative and non-violent approach by two groups of indigenous peoples – the Innu of Labrador in their resistance to Government’s sanctioning of the Muskrat Falls Hydroelectric Project; and (ii) the Amazonian Indigenous peoples in their quiet confident participation in the Synod on the Amazon, challenging the ongoing destruction of their culture and way of life.

A distinct voice came from the students of St Saviour’s College who showed us a diverse culture alive in Toowoomba’s oldest secondary school, a richly diverse community of young women from rural and remote Queensland, Australia and Papua New Guinea. The prayer reflection created by Bridget Crisp rsm showed us a new way of seeing three traditional practices: **prayer** as our relationship with God, **fasting** as a call to reflect on the way we live, and **almsgiving** as an invitation to consider our journey in community.

Important Events Surrounding This Month’s Reflection

Firmly grounded by this foundation, we now begin our reflection on *Mercy and the Degradation of Earth*. We are just six months from the *Synod on the Amazon* in which we listened “to the voice of the Amazon, stirred by the powerful breath of the Holy Spirit in the cry of the wounded land and its inhabitants.”ⁱ We are in the heart of Eastertime, hearing the words of an Amazonian Leader, “May your life be full of reasons to stand up for justice and with an ongoing pursuit for the kingdom in your ordinary life, in which extraordinary things can happen when we allow that Easter hope to take place.”ⁱⁱ We have just celebrated the 50th anniversary of Earth Day with its theme *Climate Action* – a united call for the creativity, ambition, and bravery needed to meet our climate crisis. We are rejoicing in the fifth anniversary of *Laudato Si’* to be celebrated during the week of May 16-24 as we continue to be challenged by Pope Francis’ call to the global

Catholic community to undertake ambitious actions to address the mounting environmental perils facing the planet and its peoples.

This COVID-19 Pandemic Time

However, another time has overtaken everything else – the COVID-19 pandemic has made vulnerable every woman, man and child in over 180 countries on Earth. To date, there have almost three million confirmed cases of COVID-19 with almost 190,000 deaths (by the time of your reading, the numbers will be higher). This pandemic is marked by social distancing, closed schools, businesses and borders; overcrowded hospitals, highly vulnerable long-term care facilities, ethical dilemmas about who is tested and who is treated, threatened livelihoods of millions and stalled economic activity.

The pandemic is more negatively affecting society's most vulnerable people. The UN Secretary-General warns that "the pandemic is having devastating social and economic consequences for women and girls" with a significant loss of women's paid employment, an exponential increase in women's unpaid employment and a horrifying increase in violence against women in their homes.ⁱⁱⁱ Highly vulnerable, too, are homeless or precariously housed people who cannot maintain good hygiene or good diet, cannot frequently wash their hands, cannot self-isolate, suffer disproportionately from the very illnesses which are all risk factors for experiencing Covid-19's more deadly symptoms, and cannot stay home because they have no home. Research shows that 27% of those dying with COVID-19 to date in the United States have been African American, more than twice their share of the population while in Britain, 35% of critically ill patients with COVID-19 were non-white, even though black, Asian and minority ethnic people account for only 13% of the population in that country.^{iv}

Many hope that Earth is enjoying an unexpected Sabbath time. With the significant decrease in transportation by car, plane and train and the closure of factories, there is a dramatic reduction in air pollution. However, scientists say that fossil fuel consumption would have to decrease 10% globally for one year before such a change would be long-term. Sadly, the pandemic has seen a dramatic increase in medical waste, a decrease in recycling and the postponing of most environmental forums and advocacy activities globally and locally.

There is strong research evidence that outbreaks of zoonotic diseases (diseases that spread from wild animals to humans) such as Ebola, SARS, Bird Flu, MERS, Zika, West Nile Virus and COVID-19 are on the rise. However, at the heart of the increased spread of these diseases is human interference through climate change, industrial agriculture, deforestation, illegal wildlife trade, animal habitat destruction and densely populated spaces.

Degradation of Earth – Three-Layered Emergency

The danger of this time is that the threat to human beings through this pandemic will overshadow all attempts at ending the degradation of Earth. Research, our lived experience and our contemplative reflection tell us that, in addition to the pandemic, there are three other intertwined layers of a planetary health emergency: global climate change (with increasing levels of carbon dioxide, temperatures and sea levels; decreasing ice sheets and glaciers; and increasing extreme weather events); approaching tipping points (sudden and irreversible collapse) of ecosystems in the Amazon, Australia, the Arctic and the Antarctic; and an unprecedented threat of biodiversity loss and habitat destruction.

Any attempt to restore planetary health must be rooted in connections among human, economic and natural systems. In *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis gave us the new phrase “integral ecology,” inviting us to integrate the economy, society and environment in a new way:

We urgently need a humanism capable of bringing together the different fields of knowledge, including economics, in the service of a more integral and integrating vision. Today, the analysis of environmental problems cannot be separated from the analysis of human, family, work-related and urban contexts, nor from how individuals relate to themselves, which leads in turn to how they relate to others and to the environment. *Laudato Si'* (#190)

Degradation of Earth – To What Is Mercy Calling Us?

When Do We Answer Mercy's Call?

Mercy is calling us to respond in two distinct but connected moments in time: (i) during the pandemic time, find the ways to keep the embers burning, and (ii) at the end of the pandemic, with energetic resolution and passionate commitment, begin a new journey to end the degradation of Earth and to appropriately care for our common home.

How Do We Answer Mercy's Call?

O“mercy” words from the Sanskrit *dayaa* – *suffering the suffering of all beings* and from the Hebrew Scriptures and the Greek New Testament (*hesed* – *eleos* – *mercy*; *rahamim* – *splagchna* – *compassion* and *hanan* – *charis* – *grace*) are echoed a recent article entitled, “Eight Emerging Lessons: From Coronavirus to Climate Action” by Otto Scharmer. Scharmer is the creator of *Theory U*. He says that there are two possible responses in this crisis: **(i) absencing** marked by ignorance, hate, and fear; and **(ii) presencing** marked by curiosity, compassion, and courage – echoes of our mercy words. He then challenges all of us, “How can we reimagine our economic, our democratic, and our learning systems in ways that bridge the ecological, the social, and the spiritual divides of our time?”^v

What Do We Answer in Response to Mercy's Call?

How can we keep the embers burning during the pandemic Sabbath? Include care for our common home in our daily prayer in whatever form we pray, participate in virtual programs made available by groups such as *Global Catholic Climate Movement* or *Interfaith Power & Light* or *UISG*, have conversations with friends about one good thing they are doing, have a conversation with a sunrise or sunset or rain or snow about climate change or biodiversity or ecosystem collapse, imagine one new action you will take after the pandemic to bring about climate restoration, imagine one new action you will encourage your local community and your Congregation to take, write a letter to Earth making your personal promise to be a more compassionate and wiser citizen of our common home after we survive this pandemic.

After the pandemic ends, how and with whom can we advocate not for a return to the old ways but for a commitment to new ways? The way in which governments and people have responded to COVID-19 shows the rapid societal changes we are willing to take if we believe there is a global crisis. Therefore, the focus of our efforts must be on intensifying awareness of the emergency relating to climate, to biodiversity and to the collapse of ecosystems during this time. These threats to our common home must be part of conversations about strategy, scenario planning and

recovery for every group in the society: government and civil society, private sector and public sector, religious traditions and congregations.

We must listen to the scientists, environmentalists and activists who understand the complexities of our threefold emergency and, as *Laudato Si'* reminds us, its impact on human health, food security, agricultural security, political and economic stability, and governance. The response to the emergency must be government-based and global just as has been the response to the emergency of this pandemic. The challenge for us will be in finding even more innovative and energizing ways of spreading this message to all those can do something about it. We cannot allow the shadow of this COVID-19 pandemic to be a sacrifice made by so many, some even to death, without any light to be gathered from it.

In *Good Reading*, you will find a letter, dated 26 March 2020, which expresses well the challenge that leaders must accept. It is a global call from the *Planetary Emergency Partnership* signed by 3,500+ leaders and scientists globally, with a public online campaign. Its theme: *Emerging from the Emergency – One Planet, One Humanity, One Health*.^{vi}

Not only must our society change, but this pandemic calls for all faith traditions, including our Church, to change. Our Church must become more committed to living, in itself, integral ecology named by Pope Francis. We – the people and Earth – desperately need a Church which is socially and ecologically just, transparent, and inclusive. The teachings of and learnings from *The Joy of the Gospel*, *Laudato Si'* and the *Synod on the Amazon* must resonate through the Church if the Church is to survive and to be the beacon of hope and inclusion embedded in its Gospel call.

Our Response in Mercy Global Presence

Sisters of Mercy, Associates or partners in Mercy have been actively engaged in efforts to end the planetary health emergency of climate, biodiversity and ecosystems. What more can we do? Let us use our engagement in global contemplation through Mercy Global Presence to find wisdom, energy, new directions, new language, courage and new hope for Earth and her health. Let our engagement be the catalyst for taking seriously this Sabbath time as a time to imagine new ways in the new time that will emerge. Imagine if we gave the planetary emergency the same obsessive attention, intense focus and incredible energy which we are giving COVID-19. Imagine if we showed the planetary emergency the same personal and national discipline which we showed COVID-19! Do not wait. Begin to plan that future today. **IMAGINE! NOW REIMAGINE!**

In Richard Hendrick's words in *Lockdown*, we find hope:

Yes there is even death. But there can always be a rebirth of love.
Wake to the choices you make as to how to live now.
Today, breathe. Listen, behind the factory noises of your panic,
The birds are singing again, the sky is clearing,
Spring is coming,
And we are always encompassed by Love.
Open the windows of your soul
And though you may not be able to touch across the empty square,
Sing.

ⁱ Synod of Bishops, *Final Document: The Amazon: New Paths for the Church and for an Integral Ecology*, Special Assembly for the Pan-Amazonian Region, Vatican, 26 October 2019, #3.

ⁱⁱ Mauricio López Oropez, "Amazon Easter," *Easter with an Amazonian Face*, Weekly reflections on resurrection from participants of the Amazon Synod, Interreligious Working Group on Extractive Industries, Easter 2020, accessed at <https://justresponse.faith/easter-amazonian-face-pdf>.

ⁱⁱⁱ António Guterres, Secretary-General of the United Nations, "Video message on Women and COVID," 09 April 2020, accessed at <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2020-04-09/secretary-generals-video-message-women-and-covid>.

^{iv} Zeeshan Aleem, "New CDC data shows Covid-19 is affecting African Americans at exceptionally high rate," *Vox*, 18 April 2020, accessed at <https://www.vox.com/coronavirus-covid19/2020/4/18/21226225/coronavirus-black-cdc-infection>. And Intensive Care National Audit & Research Centre, *Report on 5578 patients critically ill with COVID-19*, 17 April 2020, accessed at <https://www.icnarc.org/About/Latest-News/2020/04/10/Report-On-5578-Patients-Critically-Ill-With-Covid-19>.

^v Otto Scharmer, "Eight Emerging Lessons: From Coronavirus to Climate Action," published in *Medium*, a social publishing platform, reprinted in *Landscape News*, 16 March 2020. Accessed at <https://medium.com/presencing-institute-blog/eight-emerging-lessons-from-coronavirus-to-climate-action-683c39c10e8b>.

^{vi} Planetary Emergency Partnership, *Open Letter to Global Leaders – A Healthy Planet for Healthy People*, 26 March 2020, accessed at <https://clubofrome.org/>