Becoming Refugias: Climate Change and a Change of Heart

by Joan Brown, O.S.F.

I will give them a heart to know me, that I am the LORD. They shall be my people and I will be their God, for they shall return to me with their whole heart. Jeremiah 24:7

2013 may go down in history as the year when humans knew, as conclusively as science is able to state, that human-induced climate change was bound to be the greatest ethical, moral, and spiritual challenge of the twenty-first century and beyond. The UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change Report (IPCC), released in fall 2013, states that if the industrialized world continues on its present course—a Titanic steaming heedlessly onward into a melting iceberg—the earth will experience 3.6 degrees Fahrenheit of warming beyond preindustrial levels by the end of the century. That will mean radically higher oceans and submerged coastal cities. Sea levels will continue to rise. According to the IPCC report, even if humankind completely ceases all greenhouse gas emissions today, warming would continue for “many centuries,” and “a large fraction of climate change is thus irreversible on a human timescale.” Additional excerpts from the report state:

- Warming of the climate system is unequivocal, and since the 1950s, many of the observed changes are unprecedented over decades to millennia.

- Human influence on the climate system is clear in warming of the atmosphere and the ocean, in changes in the global water cycle, in reductions in snow and ice, in global mean sea level rise, and in changes in some climate extremes. It is extremely likely that human influence has been the dominant cause of the observed warming since the mid-20th century.

- Each of the last three decades has been successively warmer at the Earth’s surface than any preceding decade since 1850. In the Northern Hemisphere, 1983–2012 was likely the warmest 30-year period of the last 1400 years.

- Ocean warming dominates the increase in energy stored in the climate system, accounting for more than 90% of the energy accumulated between 1971 and 2010 (high confidence). It is virtually certain that the upper ocean (0–700 m) warmed from 1971 to 2010, and it likely warmed between the 1870s and 1971.1

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1 UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, http://www.ipcc.ch/.
On May 9, 2013, scientists at the Mauna Loa center (where David Keeling, originator of the climate change graphs works) alerted the world that the Earth had reached the ambient CO₂ level of 400 ppm (parts per million of CO₂). The outermost threshold for healthy life on our planet is 350 ppm. The Mauna Loa record can now be placed in the context of variations in CO₂ over the past 400,000 years, based on reconstructions from polar ice cores. During ice ages, the CO₂ levels were around 200 ppm. The levels in 2005 were around 378 ppm. If the rate of fossil-fuel burning continues to rise, CO₂ will rise to around 1500 ppm, and the atmosphere will not return to pre-industrial levels even tens of thousands of years into the future.²

Although climate deniers still rally (almost exclusively in the United States where they are well-funded by oil, gas, and coal companies), the conversation around the world focuses upon how to reduce carbon emissions to cause less damage.³ Specific questions include what measures of mitigation can be implemented, who will pay for both these measures and the damages and losses experienced by those in the developing world, and who is the least responsible for climate change.

An analysis of the on-the-ground impacts of the scientific data can be found in numerous sources and should be read by people of faith alongside sacred scripture and prayers. A recent World Bank report, “Turn Down the Heat: Climate Extremes, Regional Impacts, and the Case for Resilience,” offers a prognosis supported by climatologists who predict a temperature rise of 3.6 degrees Fahrenheit within a generation and 7.2 degrees Fahrenheit within 90 years.⁴ Climate scientist James Hansen, formerly with NASA, has argued that we face an “apocalyptic” future.⁵

News headlines continue to offer more information than we desire, with details of damage and death from unprecedented hurricanes, typhoons, tornadoes, floods, and droughts.

Typhoon Haiyan, which killed thousands and left part of the Philippines in shambles, is just one example of the magnitude of storms scientists state are becoming the new normal. In the United States, Hurricane Sandy, with record storm surges that paralyzed the East Coast, continues to be news more than one year later. Yet few realize that the devastation to the Caribbean nation, Haiti, was more expensive comparatively and had a greater effect upon the livelihood of the people.⁶

People of all faith traditions are very good at supporting aid assistance, such as Catholic Relief Services, Mennonite and Presbyterian Disaster Services, Jewish Disaster Response Corps, Islamic Relief, and the relief organizations of many other denominations.⁷ However, thus far they have failed to congeal into a movement addressing the long-term implications of climate change and the policies needed internationally to address the cause of these devastating climate irruptions.

As national and international governments are mired in deadlock over taking action to address climate change, the moral and ethical voices of faith leaders and their followers are needed more than ever. The potential power of engaged religions was laid out well in a 2003 publication of World Watch Institute:

> Religious institutions and leaders can bring strong assets to the effort to build a sustainable world: the capacity to shape cosmologies (worldviews), moral authority, a large base of advocates significant material resources, and community building capacity. Indeed, religion is an important source of change within individuals and across societies. Cultural historian Thomas Berry sees religion as one of the major societal drivers of change in the world.⁸

Challenging religions to take a significant role in this moment requires taking seriously the opportunity to provide meaning, moral leadership, and even evaluation of the dualistic theologies that separate the human from the natural world and issues of climate change from other social concerns. A change of heart is invited.

There are many worthy faith-based organizations and leaders in the United States and across the world working to address climate change. However, the moral imperative has not taken hold. Groups such as Interfaith Power and Light, Catholic Coalition on Climate Change, Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life, Green Faith, Franciscan Action Network, and Evangelical Environmental Alliance plod the path of prophetic witness much the same way as historical struggles like the Civil Rights movement did.⁹ If only faith traditions could see through the forest for the trees, they would realize this moment of crisis is a moment of grace. A renewal of spiritual depth, relevance, meaningful inclusion of young people, and filling a deep void of meaning with a vital social call can alter this crisis.

Working for several decades with climate change and environmental devastation from a Franciscan worldview, I have been engaged in direct service projects, education, action, and policy advocacy. Having worked and pondered day in and day out for years, I offer several insights that may be helpful for those of us motivated by religious traditions to offer our hearts for service now and into the future. In this essay I will explore with you several areas that might deepen our understanding and response to climate change with the lens of faith. We will briefly look at concepts of refugia, climate change of heart, climate change and poverty, mysticism, and praxis.

**Becoming Refugias**

When volcano Mt. St. Helen erupted in 1980, a barren, ash-laden terrain lay where forest once sprung green. Scientists thought it would take centuries for life to spring from the blackened scape. Now, some 30 years later, the mountain is carpeted in moss and purple lupine. Fox and deer tracks surprise the eye. Scientists learned that when the mountain blasted ash and devastation, there were small spaces hidden beneath rocks and beside trees that were not touched. Sheltered seeds, roots, and small life forms were able to slowly come back, reinvigorating the mountain. Scientists were surprised by these creative sanctuaries. The concept of refugia, safe refuge within the face of destructive forces, can offer many spiritual and practical insights into the way forward as we live with increased devastation and challenges from climate change chaos. Seeking out a place of refugia, sanctuary, or shelter in difficult times is a spiritual and mystical thread that runs golden through all major religious traditions. Buddhism invites followers to begin by finding refuge in the Three Jewels: Buddha, Dharma (teaching), and Sangha (community).

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In the book of Numbers 35:9-15, Judaism reminds followers that God commands the people to create cities of refuge in the Promised Land. Devotees of Islam look to the Quran as a reminder to seek refuge in Allah and Allah’s words. Through meditation, Sufis find a sanctuary in the heart where they meet Allah and are renewed for the hard work of life. Many Christians find comfort in the words of Psalm 46: “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in time of trouble … Be still and know that I am God.” Catholic devotions and prayers to Mary find many with burdened hearts and lives imploring Maria del Refugio to provide assistance and comfort in order to face their ordeals.

Within the sanctuary where one meets Allah, God, Mary, YHWH, or the Buddha, the human heart is encouraged to grow in compassion and creativity for service within the world. But those on a spiritual path do not remain in the shelter of God’s wings or in refugia. Within the cave of the heart, they hear a call to be compassionate and prophetic within the world. This demands radical voices for change in response to the great crises of the time. In the twenty-first century, the cries of species going extinct, melting ice caps, thousands of climate refugees, sand-filled wells, drought-devastated fields, and unprecedented storms invite believers to enter and become refugia.

Climate Change of the Heart

How people of faith respond to this great moral, ethical, and spiritual challenge, which some say is the challenge of our time, may determine the fate of the human species. In March 2013, Admiral Samuel J. Locklear III, the commander of the US Pacific Command, told security and foreign policy specialists in Cambridge, Mass., that global climate change was the greatest threat the United States faced—bigger than terrorism, Chinese hackers, and North Korean nuclear missiles. In light of this reality, faith communities and faith leaders carry an essential voice for ethics, justice, and action that call for a conversion of heart.

Climate change is a heart matter. For all the science, statistics, projections, technological fixes, and calls to action, ultimately, the human species is being invited into a new epoch of responsibility. Climate change crisis is a spiritual and heart crisis. In the midst of so much destruction, our people search for meaning as they face the spiritual crisis in which climate change is embedded. Four symptoms affect every aspect of life: inner void, consumerism, ecological divide, and social divide.

Pope Francis has made the connection between economics, environment, and human dignity. This moment is an opportunity to renew and re-envision our religious traditions in light of refugia. Prophetic geologian, Fr. Thomas Berry, C.P., reflected on the technological worship that has separated us from nature and hidden our responsibility for stewardship, writing, “We have had little attraction toward a shared communion existence within the greater world of living forms. We hardly think of ourselves within a multi-species community. But we are ready to receive the cosmos now because of the desperation of our situation, the loss of animals and plants and aspects of the universe.”


Today is a “Jeremiah moment,” calling not just for conversion but also for transformation at a soul level. As the executive director of New Mexico Interfaith Power and Light, I work with people of all faith traditions to address climate change through education, action, and policy advocacy; the challenges are ever present. But the root challenge calls for breaking through a dominant worldview of separation into a new understanding of the command to love God, self, and neighbor. Neighbor now means every being within the cosmos, a very Franciscan concept of kinship that demands justice and care for the poor and all creatures.

Fr. Berry speaks of the gravitational bonding and attraction between components and the intimate presence of each with one another as a mystical attraction. “The deeper meaning of this is not generally understood because the radical discontinuity between humans and non-humans, which has led to humans’ savage assault on the earth, is so ingrained. The earth has been seen as a collection of objects to be used instead of as a communion of subjects of which we are all a part.”

During the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change Conference of Parties (COP19) on November 13-24, 2013 in Warsaw, Poland, the world was again reminded of the separation of the “developed” and “developing world” as leaders struggled to address climate justice demands to reduce carbon emissions by 80 percent by mid-century and set in place recompense for those who produce the least emissions but suffer the most.

Those displaced and suffering hunger and thirst due to climate change are not statistics. This point was so evident in 2009 when world leaders at COP15 in Copenhagen failed to draft and sign a binding climate agreement. That December 12, 2009, at the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Patroness of the Americas, some 100,000 people from across the planet marched on the streets of Copenhagen. I was there amidst the colorful banners, puppets, floats, and signs which read things like “Climate Justice,” “Think of the Future,” and “Save Creation.” Bella Center, the site of educational presentations and negotiations where 40,000 people from nearly 150 nations gathered, was filled with more signs and many stories for the two-week duration of the international meeting. Among the many moving lamentations shared within packed rooms at the COP15, several stories stand out:

Southern Bangladesh Mother

I am Shorbanu Khatu, a single mother of four living in a small village of 25,000 people. My husband was a farmer of rice, vegetables and fruit. Fifteen years ago salinization came to our land. We lost the trees and everything. My husband had to go into the forest to collect honey to sell. One day he did not return because he was eaten by a tiger. I lost everything, and my husband’s family put me on the street. I was homeless, husbandless and with children.

My parents came to my rescue and built me a mud home, but I could not grow crops because of the salinity of the soil and the hotter summers and winters with less rain. I started working as domestic help carrying firewood, water and getting fish.

Six months ago Cyclone Aila came and took everything. We were eating lunch when our house was flooded. I grabbed onto the roof and floated until I lost consciousness. When I awoke I was in a hospital. The whole area is under water. I thankfully found my family, but there was not food; we lost everything.

14 Toben, Recovering A Sense of the Sacred, 55.
We used to think God was punishing us. Now I know it is human-made. I come speaking justice, seeking compensation. I want my life back. My village is now under water. We want our life back. We don't know how to live.

Constance Okollet, Ugandan Woman Farmer

In 2007 the floods came and covered the village. When we came back, everything was gone, not sheep, goats or gardens. Malaria came, cholera came, and immediately drought followed. We had no gardens, no water in our wells for seven months. More sickness of meningitis, malaria, HIV came, and we do not want to see more suffering.

Then there was another drastic rain that destroyed what was left. Now everyone is hungry. We used to have two seasons, but now we have no season; we don't know when to plant or harvest.

We don't know when to eat. You are always gambling. There are no seasons, only drought and flooding, drought and flooding. My purpose is to share my story with the whole world. We want our seasons back. We want our generations back. We want to stop emissions. We want money to adapt to changes of climate because we are dying.17

Linking Poverty and Climate Change

Sitting with the stories of these beautiful women, one hears the call of Matthew’s Gospel (25:45). What does it mean to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and give comfort to brothers and sisters in a world where the new normal is a changed climate filled with droughts, floods, major weather events, shortages of water and food, and growing political turmoil? How are the Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy lived in a world that the recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report warns is warming more rapidly than scientists predicted? How can emissions be reduced? Who will pay for adaptation, mitigation, and damage and loss?

In reality, all the social and justice issues people of faith now address whether they be immigration, human trafficking, hunger, war, poverty, or health of children are increasingly related to how we understand ourselves as part of a Sacred Earth community where we address climate change.

Catholic Relief Services and other aid agencies brace for a growing number of refugees. Since 2001 the International Red Cross has noted that climate change disasters are a bigger cause of population displacement than war. “The International Red Cross estimates that there are more environmental refugees than political refugees fleeing from wars and other conflicts. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) says 36 million people were displaced by natural disasters in 2009, the last year such a report was taken. Scientists predict this number will rise to at least 50 million by 2050. Some say it could be as high as 200 million.”18

According to the USCCB Committee on Domestic and International Policy’s document Faithful Stewards of God’s Creation, “Global climate change poses one of the greatest threats to the most vulnerable among us. Because of poverty, health, age and location the poor are especially susceptible to the potential negative impacts of climate change.”19

Solidarity calls us to stand with and for the exploited and the vulnerable of the earth today; that will mean preventing the burdens of climate change being shifted to people in the developing world. Intergenerational solidarity must be a component of our work, which requires a slightly more challenging spiritual and imaginative leap to stand with and for our brothers and sisters yet unborn.

Pope Francis too calls forth a deeper understanding of love within the challenging days ahead. Several of his many statements over the past months addressing the interlinking of creation and humanity offer a wealth of reflections for homilies or teaching lessons and prayers. For example, in March 2013, he stated, “But it is a difficult journey, if we do not learn to grow in love for this world of ours. Here too, it helps me to think of the name of Francis, who teaches us profound respect for the whole of creation and the protection of our environment, which all too often, instead of using for the good, we exploit greedily, to one another’s detriment.”

The journey is challenging but not impossible if we grow in love. Love, not apathy, despair, or avoidance, motivates us as we educate ourselves about climate change and ponder the best ways to approach the challenges. As faith leaders we can no longer avoid integrating climate change into sermons, homilies, educational classes, plant facilities, and our good works within church, mosque, temple, and sangha communities.

Fr. Thomas Berry, C.P. reflected that humans find themselves within a new epoch of evolution that calls for a new sense of relationships:

We are now in a numinous integrative phase where we seek to understand ourselves in the context of an emerging cosmic-human-earth process. In the new sacred story, relationships are the primary context of existence. We are in the third age of relationships in our human evolution. The first was the human-Divine relationship, the second was the human-human relationship, and now the third must be the human-earth-Divine relationship as we discover our bond of intimacy with all living forms and recognize the companionship of the abiding numinous presence.

Franciscan Sister, scientist, and theologian Ilia Delio speaks of interconnected relationships as a kind of quantum entanglement. Realizing that everything is related to everything else requires a shift in worldview and moral and ethical sensibilities. In Christian terms, an expansive view is required, for example, when rereading Mark 12:30-31: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.”

“God is born from within when we come to know ourselves in the divine love that lives deep within us. There too we discover that we are not strangers in this evolving universe. We are its future.” Knowing ourselves in this light brings forth great wonder and responsibility. Pope Francis also sees the radical need for change if humans are to live in communion on the planet and leave a future for our children. Again, actions must be linked to a deeper immersion in love:

But we are often driven by pride of domination, of possessions, manipulation, of exploitation; we do not “care” for it (environment), we do not respect it (environment), we do not consider it (environment) as a free gift that we must care for. We are losing the attitude of wonder, contemplation, listening to creation; thus we are no longer able to read what Benedict XVI calls “the rhythm of the love

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story of God and man.” Why does this happen? Why do we think and live in a horizontal manner, we have moved away from God, we no longer read His signs. … Man is not in charge today, money is in charge, money rules. God our Father did not give the task of caring for the earth to money, but to us, to men and women: we have this task! Instead, men and women are sacrificed to the idols of profit and consumption: it is the “culture of waste.” If you break a computer it is a tragedy, but poverty, the needs, the dramas of so many people end up becoming the norm. … A person dying is not news, but if the stock markets drop ten points it is a tragedy! Thus people are disposed of, as if they were trash. So I would like us all to make a serious commitment to respect and protect creation, to be attentive to every person, to counter the culture of waste and disposable, to promote a culture of solidarity and of encounter.23

Among the many significant points of this address, there is one that stands out as key for attending to the environmental crisis, which is really a soul crisis: “We are losing the attitude of wonder, contemplation, listening to creation; thus we are no longer able to read what Benedict XVI calls ‘the rhythm of the love story of God and man.’” The love story extends to women and all of creation, for the new science reveals to us that we cannot speak about the human unless we realize that the human is embedded within creation. As Ilia Delio says, we are all quantumly entangled.

Awe, Wonder, and Mysticism

Without wonder and listening with the heart we cannot find our way. Religious traditions hold the keys that the secular society longs to hold in their hands. Mysticism is the work of religion and spiritual traditions. It is out of the mystical heart that justice, peace, and integrity of creation spring. In this moment ministers and teachers are being called to reexamine prayer, meditation, and sacred scriptures and traditions within the context of climate change.

In her book, The Environmental Vision of Thomas Merton, Monica Weiss explores Merton’s growing understanding of the interconnections between contemplation, nature, and environmental action. Merton’s le pointe vierge haunts the reader, given our context:

Again, that expression, le pointe vierge, (I cannot translate it)24 comes in here. At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and by illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God, which is never at our disposal, from which God disposes of our lives, which is inaccessible to the fantasies of our own mind or brutalities of our own will. This little point of nothingness and of absolute poverty is the pure glory of God in us. It is so to speak His name written in us, as our poverty, as our indigence, as our dependence, as our sonship. It is like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven. It is in every body, and if we could see it we would see these billions of points of light coming together in the face and blaze of a sun that would make all the darkness and cruelty of life vanish completely … I have no program for seeing. It is only given. But the gate of heaven is everywhere. (Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander, 158)25

As we reflect upon le pointe vierge, the point of all possibility or the point of dawn as he prayed the Psalms, can we wonder if the environmental moment we find ourselves in might be a gate to the spark, the moment unveiled when

24 Literally—’the virgin point.’ See Christine M. Bochen, Thomas Merton: The Essential Writings (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000), 60-61: ‘Merton defined le pointe vierge as the ‘point at which I can meet God in a real and experimental contact.’ He said, ‘This little point of nothingness and of absolute poverty is the pure glory of God in us.’”
anything is possible and all is known within All? This is a moment of Hope in that true meaning of hope, not as an object in some distant future, some wishful thinking, or a dream that things will work out alright or that God will take care of everything but hope in the deepest soul sense, rooted deep within our planetary existence. In Merton’s essay “Learning to Live,” he considers the goal of university and monastic education as the activation of this spark. “It means discovering the ground of one’s personality, and realizing the light and wisdom of God within oneself, and recognizing God in everything. It is a consciousness that transcends all division, all separation.”

For many modern Jews, tikkum olam or repairing the world is how the work of environmental social change is addressed. The root of this popular phrase comes from a cosmological myth attributed to the Jewish mystic, Rabbi Isaac Luria of Safed, known as Ari (1534-1572). The myth “The Shattering of the Vessels” evolved out of reflecting upon the fact that the Genesis Creation Story speaks of God creating light on the first day but creating the sun, moon, and stars on the fourth day.

The Myth of “The Shattering of the Vessels”

In the beginning the presence of God filled the universe. To make room for creation, God, who was light, drew in breath and contracted so that darkness was created. Then God said, “Let there be light” (Gen 1:3). The primordial light came forth and filled ten holy vessels.

God sent forth the vessels into the world, but the vessels were too fragile to contain the divine light. They broke open, split, and scattered holy sparks like seeds or stars everywhere. That is why humans were created—to gather the sparks, no matter where they are hidden. When enough holy sparks are gathered the broken vessels will be restored and tikkum olam will be complete.

As we live with climate change, I believe we need to explore deeply the call to mysticism, which everyone is invited into. From this source of psychic energy we gain wisdom, creativity, and love to walk forward each day. Indeed, the place where one individually meets the Holy Spark of God is an antidote to a consumer culture fraught with a lack of meaning and individualism. Upon being with the Spark of the Divine, the only true response is service for humanity and creation.

Fr. Thomas Berry, C.P., offered another insight into the concept of Divine Spark, which he spoke of as a numinous moment. Nearly forty years ago at the thirtieth UN Spiritual Conference, he addressed the challenge of environmental devastation and climate change in his paper, “Catching the Power of the Wind”:

The second observation we make is that our present crisis must itself be seen as a numinous moment in human affairs inspiring both awe and terror. All basic transformation moments possess a certain numinous, sacred quality such as the dawn and dusk, seasonal change throughout the year, and the moments of passage in human life, from birth through maturity. So too moments of great historical change are numinous moments and must be seen as such…

A radical shift is taking place within the entire Earth system. Human intelligence is taking upon itself an extensive control and direction of the Earth system that it has never before exercised. This has repercussions throughout the entire religious and spiritual worlds as well as the political, economic, and cultural processes that have so far given the basic meaning and value to human life. If we fail to grasp

the dimensions of what is happening we will find ourselves caught in a whirlwind of destruction rather than entering a period of soaring achievement.27

The challenge and opportunity are before us. As practitioners of ministry we hear Deuteronomy 30:19-20, and many other scriptural passages with new eyes and ears. “See, I have today set before you life and good, death and evil…. Choose life, then, that you and your descendants may live, by loving the LORD, your God, obeying his voice, and holding fast to him.”

Sufism, the mystical love aspect of Islam, focuses on transformation and awakening the heart to the Beloved. When we love someone or something, we offer our whole selves in service. There are a number of ways to look anew at our traditions, rituals, and lives as we move into a climate change of heart. Once we know the God of refugia, we can become refugia in our changing world. Once we meet the Divine Spark, the pointe de la vierge, we must share this transformational energy in our beloved world.

**Spirituality of Sabbath: Opening to Wonder and Contemplation**

Can we set aside a day or part of a day where we buy nothing, drive nowhere, and nourish ourselves with live communication and walks within the natural world? Using less opens the heart to God and neighbor, like opening a window to fresh air.

**Expanding Understanding of Commandments**

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* expands the traditional Christian understanding of the seventh commandment (“Thou shalt not steal”) to include responsibility to respect the integrity of creation.28

**Re-envisioning Service and Spiritual and Corporal Works of Mercy**

People of faith worldwide engage in good works. Usually these are direct service acts of charity; while needed, these do not change structures or address policies of energy, water, or climate. In the Christian tradition, Corporal Works of Mercy are the seven practices of charity, based on Christ’s prediction of the last judgment (Matt 25:41). They are: to feed the hungry, to give drink to the thirsty, to clothe the naked, to harbor the harbourless, to visit the sick, to ransom the captive, and to bury the dead. The Spiritual Works of Mercy recognize sin, ignorance, doubt, sorrow, and other human conditions that keep us from fully loving and serving God. The Spiritual Works of Mercy are: to instruct the ignorant, to counsel the doubtful, to admonish sinners, to bear wrongs patiently, to forgive offences willingly, to comfort the afflicted, and to pray for the living and the dead.

Re-imagining the works of mercy as planetary principles within a planetary morality leads us to new understandings of ourselves, the meaning of the common good, and the well-being of the sacred earth community. The works of mercy engage us in practical and deep spiritual encounters because they refer to the body, the fate of Earth, and humans as one.

For example, feeding the hungry challenges systemic engagement to protect the food supply by ensuring food production does not contaminate soil nor eschew genetically modified organisms. Society as a whole should re-

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sponsibly and harmoniously manage the Earth and all the resources that she provides. We must be ethically and politically involved in distributive justice and must support policies for sustainable agriculture, remembering that eating is a moral act. Give drink to the thirsty expands our understanding to include water as a right for all living beings. One-third of humanity lives in areas of water stress. One billion people have access only to contaminated water. Water is a public service that should not be privatized, commoditized, or sold. Water sources are public trusts to be protected from contamination of all types, including extractive industries and mercury pollution from coal-fired power plants.

In terms of the Spiritual Works of Mercy, just two reflections are: (1) Convert the sinners encompasses a heightened consciousness and cognizance of what constitutes sin. Geocide and diminishment of life on the planet for future generation are social sins. Conversion of sinners requires a change in lifestyle along with a sustainable energy economy and standard of living. We must engage leaders in government and business to dramatically restructure our economic and technological systems. (2) Instruct the ignorant demands more than the 4R's of reading, 'riting, 'rithmatic, and religion. In the Buddhist tradition, the ignorant are those whose eyes have not been opened to reality. Instructing the ignorant in our day involves a change in worldview where water, earth, air, and people are not perceived as commodities to assist in profit-making. We must understand that we can no longer engage in dualistic thinking that separates us from the rest of the living earth and prevents us from deeply knowing that we are all one.

**Stewardship of Buildings and Earth**

Buildings and land need to enter into faith communities' stewardship plans. Energy efficiency, lighting upgrades, solar installations, water conservation, and harvesting efforts care for creation, save CO₂ emissions, reduce carbon footprints, and save financial resources. Organizations such as Interfaith Power and Light and Green Faith have resources to assist congregations.

**Renewing Rituals, Prayers, and Holy Seasons**

Some traditions and rituals that have been lost since post-modernism can be renewed with new understandings. Some faith traditions are already reviving within a contemporary context, such as blessing of seeds, blessing of water, blessing of food, rogation days, Corpus Christi and Marian processions, litanies, and many other sacred moments for communal prayer and reflection.

**Advocacy as Part of Spiritual Practice and Call**

As we move to incorporate climate change into all aspects of the life of people of faith, one of the most important is collective policy advocacy at local, national, and international levels. The magnitude of the challenge before us requires policies addressing energy, water, carbon emissions, adaptation, mitigation, and damage and loss concerns of the poorest people and displaced nations. Organizations such as Interfaith Power and Light, Creation Justice Ministries, and Franciscan Action Network work with policy advocacy rooted within faith.

**Expanding Tithing Concepts**

As world leaders struggle to formulate ways to financially address climate change, people of faith are invited into a broader context of tithing that includes brothers and sisters and earth around the world. Interfaith Power and Light's Carbon Covenant program offers faith communities and individuals an opportunity to help interfaith efforts in Africa and Cambodia with forest protection and restoration. The Earth is being renewed while new bonds of interfaith collaboration at local levels create practical avenues for peacemaking and building an intergenerational community.
Re-envisioning Religious Education and Addressing the Generational Gap

Many faith traditions, especially in the United States, are concerned that there are very few young people within their spiritual communities. At the same moment, young people question the relevance of faith traditions. Yet, if one digs into the deeper roots of the traditions, they hold tremendous wisdom for the challenges we face that young people know too well. Religious education needs to be both spiritual and physical. Classes and experiences can be rooted in wonder and awe at how the natural world, as in the second book of Revelation, reveals the Divine.²⁹

Again, Fr. Thomas Berry, C.P. was very concerned with the world his generation was leaving its children and those to come. Offering a litany of hope rooted reality in his book Recovering A Sense of the Sacred: Conversations, he submits:

Tell them in the darkness of this time, a vast transformation is occurring in the depths of human consciousness, which is leading to the recovery of the soul, the earth, the universe and a sense of the sacred. “Tell them that the Powerful Loving Voice that spoke through every cosmic activity is speaking again now through voices all over the earth—voices who recognize that loving the earth as their common origin unifies all. In the sacred, all opposites are reconciled.”³⁰

²⁹ Augustine of Hippo (354–430 CE) made the following statement in his classic work Confessions: “In your great wisdom you, who are our God, speak to us of these things in your Book, the firmament made by you.” See St. Augustine, Confessions (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1992), Book XIII, Section 18, 326.

³⁰ Toben, Recovering A Sense of the Sacred, 134.