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NOT TOO HOT TO HANDLE : NEW ENERGIES FOR PREACHING TRUTH TO POWER

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I recently had the opportunity to visit Ghana, where I spoke at the gathering of Theresians International – an organization of Catholic women, 2,000 strong, in Ghana, the US, Thailand, the Philippines, Australia, Brazil, Mexico and Argentina. The women from the Philippines provided a very moving prayer, entitled “ Disasters and Climate Change” – which was spurred by the recent typhoon which took over 50 lives, displaced more than 270,000 people, and devastated crops and potential cropland as well. They concluded the prayer with these words: *We have abandoned Mother Earth; she is a single-parent. What is Mother Earth asking us to do?.....* A question remarkably similar to one we asked of ourselves – the Dominican Family – in June 2006, when, at the invitation of Dominican Sisters International, twelve members of the Dominican Family from the bioregions of Asia/Pacific, Europe, the Caribbean, South Africa and No. America gathered at Genesis Farm to reflect on the question : “ *WHAT IS EARTH ASKING OF THE ORDER?*” Perhaps some of you attended this gathering; perhaps most of us have forgotten that it ever took place; and surely for others here today this is new information. So we would like to resurrect this gathering and suggest that it could be a source of new energy for us in our efforts to preach truth to power.

WHAT IS EARTH ASKING OF THE ORDER? While we did, indeed, answer it to a degree, we never really kept the question alive. *WHY?????* Did we not believe that it was an important question?...a perennial question? Or.....was there a part of us that believed things weren't really that bad????? How do we feel about the question today?

Is it a question that's just too hot to handle? Or...can we help one another access that deeper energy, or newer energies, that will enable us to speak truth to power at this critical moment in Earth / Human history?

Another source of new energy for us might be The Earth Charter. As you know, this is a declaration of fundamental ethical principles for building a just, sustainable and peaceful global society in the 21st century. It is the product of a decade-long, worldwide, cross-cultural dialogue on common goals and shared values, and was promulgated as a peoples' charter in 2000 by the Earth Charter Commission. And one of our own, Eileen Gannon from Sparkill, was one of several Dominican Sisters involved in the process of bringing it to birth. The hope was to inspire in all people a new sense of global interdependence and shared responsibility for the well-being of the whole human family, the greater community of life of which we are a part, and future generations. Its Preamble is timeless –

We stand at a critical moment in Earth's history, a time when humanity must choose its future. As the world becomes increasingly interdependent and fragile, the future at once holds great peril and great promise. To move forward, we must recognize that in the midst of a magnificent diversity of cultures and life forms, we are one human family and one Earth community, with a common destiny. We must join together to bring forth a sustainable global society founded on respect for nature, universal human rights, economic justice and a culture of peace. Towards this end, it is imperative that we, the peoples of Earth – the Dominican Sisters Conference – declare our responsibility to one another, to the greater community of life, and to future generations.

So here we are in 2012. Imagine where we would be now, had we all taken to heart these words. Chances are that the world would be a much more hospitable place.

Global Climate Change : A Cross-Cutting Issue

In considering what we would deal with in this presentation, Pat, Lucianne & I mused about what it is that cuts across all the issues we deal with here in the US

and beyond. Just to refresh your memory, these are the priorities of the International Dominican Commission for Justice, Peace and Care of Creation : Peace & Security; Migration; Economic Justice & Care of the Earth. And in No. America we have committed ourselves to : Peace & Human Security; Migration/Immigration; Human Trafficking; Economic Justice; Care of Creation. After reviewing these commitments, we concluded that at the end of the day, what will continue to negatively impact all of our good works to bring about a more just world order is *global climate change*. *Global climate change is a FACT*. There is NO WAY to stop it. In many ways, it has become the new "NORMAL"to our great peril. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the leading international body for the assessment of climate change, the warming of the global climate system is unequivocal. This is evident from the increases in global average air and ocean temperature; the widespread melting of snow and ice; and rising global sea levels. Climate scientists have determined that temperature increases should be limited to two degrees centigrade to avoid irreversible damage to our Planet. To achieve this, global emissions need to peak in 2015.

So let's take a moment to consider the science...what we are hearing about this phenomenon; and some of the lies about global climate change that we need to dispel.

The Global Warming Dynamic

When carbon dioxide and other heat-trapping emissions are released into the air, they act like a blanket, creating a greenhouse effect that heats up the atmosphere. As the atmosphere warms, we experience the symptoms : more frequent and extreme storms; more frequent and severe droughts and deadly heat waves; rising sea levels and more acidic oceans – which now affect the very base of the food chain and the availability of water as well. While Earth herself, and all species are affected, the poorest people of this Planet now shoulder the greatest burden; people who do not know what " insurance" is.

Yes, Earth has warmed before – about 800,000 years ago. But carbon and other greenhouse gases were released much more slowly then, and not as

dramatically as they have been since the beginning of the Industrial Age. Never before has global climate change and the warming of the Planet been induced by human activity. Quite literally, this is a man-made dilemma.

A Question of Belief...or...Fact?

Currently, eight in ten US citizens believe global climate change / warming is real. But we need to take back the language of faith. This is not a phenomenon that falls into the venue of mystery and belief. It is a scientific fact. The relatively small proportion of people in the United States who dismiss global climate change are highly vocal and very well-funded, which creates the impression that there is more climate disbelief than actually exists. And somehow, this small proportion gets serious play on FOX News and on the editorial pages of the Wall Street Journal. So.....let's follow the money....

In 1998, the New York Times revealed a corporate funded plan through the American Petroleum Institute, coined the " Global Science Communications Action Plan." This Plan targeted school teachers and science writers, in an effort to embed scientific uncertainty in education and the media. Despite the fact that the companies were exposed in the New York Times, they went ahead with the plan. When faith-based investors challenged this funding of misinformation, most companies stopped the practice. However, ExxonMobil continues to fund organizations such as The Heartland Institute The Heritage Foundation, The Acton Institute for the Study of Religion & Liberty – and dozens of others that are little more than industry front groups. So the deception continues. It is important for us to be aware of these realities if we are to preach the truth in our day.

While the scientific community will never achieve absolute certitude regarding the phenomenon of global climate change and the warming of the Planet, there is overwhelming consensus among peer reviewed scientists that human activity is accelerating the warming of the Planet and creating the subsequent symptoms of severe climate change.

Earth's Struggle with Viability

Life as we have known it, is no more. As a human species, we have pushed the limits of Earth's carrying capacity. Our destructive patterns of consumption and production, have compromised Earth's ecosystems; polluted her rivers, streams, seas and the air we breathe; ravaged her minerals, her land, her non-human species, all of which speak to us of the Creator who brought them all – and us – into existence. And our incessant need to produce more / bigger / better, has widened the gap between those who have, and those who have not. In many ways, *Earth is no longer viable*. And if this is the case – it calls into question all of our efforts to achieve the Millennium Development Goals; all of our efforts in the areas of human trafficking; immigration; violence against women and children; economic justice; peace and security. What long-term resolutions to these issues are possible, when that which contains it all is in peril? In a very real sense, then, this is a *new moment for us*. We are the Dominican Sisters' Conference – and in our Mission Statement, *we acknowledge that we are to act both globally and locally...placing the transforming grace of the Dominican Charism at the service of our world and Church, especially in responding to the cry of the poor and to the urgent need to preserve Earth's integrity*.

We need to be asking the deeper questions; the questions that literally deal with our future as a species, and the health and viability of the Planet. As big - and as hot - as the reality of global climate change is, we must not allow ourselves to participate in a "corporate depression" that renders us irrelevant, and immobile. It has been said that,

"The very circumstances that people deny, reject, avoid are the very circumstances that could redeem them, that could make them powerful and whole, effective and fulfilled. And ultimately the very circumstances that seemed so threatening, overwhelming or disconcerting are the very circumstances that will enable your true gifts to come forward." (The Great Waves of Change: Navigating the Difficult Times Ahead – Marshall VianSummers)

It could well be that Earth's own struggle with viability holds the seeds of our own transformation.

So let's take a look at how we have been involved in this issue over the past 25 years, and allow this rich history to spur us on to even greater commitment to the healing of Earth, and of ourselves.

Preaching Truth To Power

The dynamic expressed in this quote has taken place among us. As Dominican Women, we have much to celebrate by virtue of our prophetic preaching. Global warming is now front-and-center on the agendas of many corporations and industries. Our common work with corporations was born in the anti-apartheid era, more than 40 years ago, as we gathered as members of the Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility, and in regional Catholic Coalitions for Responsible Investment. In the 1970s, we addressed concerns beyond human rights, such as infant formula, environmental issues, equality and rights in the labor force. In the mid to late 1980s, while Dominicans and others worked to put a halt to food irradiation, and were trying to imagine how to deal with a new form of life created by corporations – i.e., genetically modified organisms – we also came upon startling research regarding global warming. Working with the insurance industry, we knew of their concerns that 30% of the industry's financial reserves had disappeared between 1980-1987 due to severe storms. Even factoring in more costly homes close to shorelines, they were watching a new climate system that could be disastrous for the industry.

Almost 25 years ago, Dominican women and other faith-based investors began to file shareholder resolutions that placed the future of the Planet and her people on the agenda of corporate America. Bringing scientists into the board rooms in the 1990s, we wrestled with the data, and most companies began to withdraw funding from the campaign of misinformation pushed by the Global Climate Coalition. Then, in 2001, after investors contracted with an independent economist to evaluate the impact of climate change on businesses, the term "climate risk" was coined. As a result, businesses realized the financial

risks at stake, and slowly began to disclose their greenhouse gas emissions, which led to investments in efficiencies saving billions of dollars.

Businesses got it! Two weeks ago. The 2012 Carbon Disclosure Project Report noted : “ The data suggests that, in the absence of global or national regulation, business is stepping into the leadership vacuum and embracing climate change as a business imperative.” Dominicans are, in part, responsible for this shift in corporate behavior. With others, we pulled that off! And that’s something to celebrate! And it happened while our educators integrated climate change into their curriculums, while we pushed for responsible legislation and funding for renewable energy, and made efforts to reduce our own personal; and communal footprints.

However.....Oil companies continue to drill; consumers still guzzle energy; and corporations and others still fund tactics that keep governments beholden to special corporate interests – at the expense of the common good. So today we are faced with new prophetic challenges, due to the effects of global climate change. Faith-based investors now work with companies on new policies that need to address the growing symptoms of global warming. Among these are :

- Ø Food insecurity – so we explore sustainable food practices, including sustainable fisheries;
- Ø Drought – so we work on reducing the water footprint of corporate practices; we press companies to follow Pepsi in signing on to “water as a human right,” and we work with industries to reduce water in the production line, from jeans to cars;
- Ø The forced displacement of peoples from their native lands due to rising sea levels contributes to the trafficking of persons – so this is now included in our human rights work with companies;
- Ø And the drive to find clean energy alternatives has led to hydraulic fracturing – which damages the environment and poses serious health risks to people.

We will be more effective in addressing these issues if we see that they do not stand in their own silos; they are connected. And, what cuts across all of them is the reality of global climate change.

What Is Earth Asking of Us?

I think it is safe to say that never before has the Dominican Family had to deal with such a universal / cosmic life/death issue. We are the first Dominicans challenged by a sea change in the very environment which sustains our life, and that of all other species. Do we not have a responsibility to face this head-on? We've just seen what we have done over these past 25 years, and we should be proud of this response. However – we need to honestly ask ourselves – is it enough? Is this global phenomenon of which we are a part, just another “issue” for us; something that we gather around as an “interest?” Or should it in some way, direct our words, actions, our way of living on this Planet?

Could Earth's own struggle with viability, foster a deep transformation within us – for the sake of the common good, and for the sake of “the commons?”

At the first Earth Summit held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, a 12 year-old girl, Severn Suzuki, spoke – her words were haunting : *“I am only a child. Yet I know that if all the money spent on war was spent on ending poverty and finding environmental answers, what a wonderful place this world would be.... You grown-ups say you love us, but I challenge you, please, to make your actions reflect your words.”* Twenty years later, this past June, Severn Suzuki was back in Rio for the RIO + 20 Conference, and her words were equally haunting : she said, *“It is clear that we have not achieved the sustainable world we knew we needed 20 years ago.”*

Bill McKibben, founder of the environmental group 350.org, and author of a number of books on nature and the environment, has an essay in a TIME magazine special on GLOBAL WARMING. In the essay he says that since the 1980s, two things have changed : first – the science regarding global warming has grown darker; we know more – whether we like it or not. Secondly – our political system has failed this greatest of tests. On the other hand, during the

same time period there has been steady progress in the development of alternative energy. *We know how to do, most of what we need to do* - the question is whether we can make the large-scale shift quickly enough to matter. He goes on to say " *We can try to hang on to the present for a few more decades, pretending that we can avoid the future the scientists assure us is coming. Or, we can rise to the occasion. Imagine this as a test of whether the big brain was a good adaptation or not : Can it foresee the trouble we're in? Is it connected to a heart big enough to propel the shift we need?*" It is clearly a question of both political will – and of personal/communal will. *What is Earth asking of the Order – of us – here in the US?*

Since on the 11th of this month, we celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Second Vatican Council, perhaps it's timely to recall these words from *Gaudium et Spes*: " *The common good is the sum of the conditions of social life which are necessary for individuals, families and nations to achieve their own fulfillment; conditions which can only be achieved together.*" The "common good" of individuals, families, of nations, of religious congregations, cannot be separated from the good of "the commons" – the health of land, air, water, species, ecosystems – all of which support our very lives. "As the world becomes increasingly interdependent and fragile... We must join together to bring forth a sustainable global society..."

So back to our 2006 gathering at Genesis Farm. At that time, we urged ourselves and the Dominican Family to :

- Ø Explore the contemporary scientific understanding of the origin and the evolution of the Universe, earth, life and human consciousness, and develop skills to communicate it effectively so we can be effective preachers.
- Ø Recognize our dependency on a corporate, industrial food system and when possible to withdraw from these systems and foster sustainable agriculture and healthy eating habits.

- Ø Examine in-depth our dependency on fossil fuel.
- Ø Acknowledge the role corporations play in the devastation of the Planet in all parts of the world.
- Ø Invite the theologians of the Dominican Family to explore and reflect on the origins and evolution of human consciousness.
- Ø Recognize the critical need to preserve land for future generations, and that the diminishment of our resources and the ageing of our membership in the US has given rise to a perceived need to sell properties that we have held in common.
- Ø Recommit ourselves to our contemplative stance and to living simply, so that the children of all species will have a home.

The gathering concluded with these words: *We stand in awe before the Mystery and beauty of existence. We believe this is a graced moment, and that we have the capacity to transform ourselves and our cultures.*

Here we are at the first assembly of the Dominican Sisters Conference. We, too, stand in awe before the Mystery and Beauty of existence. We, too, believe that this is a graced moment, and that we have the capacity to transform ourselves and our cultures. But.....what difference will this conference make, for the sake of Earth and all her peoples? In the light of what was said in 2006 : *How have we done?...What is it that we have not yet done?...What might be missing from the list? What is Earth asking of us, and this newly minted Dominican Sisters Conference?*

Yesterday, Judy Neal reminded us of two very important points : first – that as “edgewalkers,” when we speak our commitments, we change the energy, and we change the world in the process; and secondly – people who are crazy enough to think they can change the world, are the only ones who do.

What about us? Are we that crazy? Or...is the question just too hot to handle?????