

DOMINICANS AT THE UN

*“Cry out as if you have a million voices, for it is silence which kills the world.”
~Catherine of Sienna*

What is Earth Asking of the Order?

Margaret Mayce, OP



Those of you who attended the Dominican Sisters Conference Convocation last October will be familiar with this question. For those who did not attend, allow me to explain.

In June 2006, at the invitation of Dominican Sisters International, twelve members of the Dominican Family representing the bioregions of Asia-Pacific, Europe, the Caribbean, South Africa and North America gathered at Genesis Farm in Blairstown, NJ, to reflect on the question **“What is Earth asking of the Order?”**

In light of the urgent need to address the issue of global warming, we would like to re-visit this question and offer it to

you for your own ongoing reflection. At the conclusion of the gathering in 2006, the following points were offered for consideration:

- 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.
- Recognize our dependency on a corporate, industrial food system and when possible to withdraw from these systems and foster sustainable agriculture and healthy eating

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habits.

- Examine in-depth our dependency on fossil fuel.
- Acknowledge the role corporations play in the devastation of the Planet in all parts of the world.
- Invite the theologians of the Dominican Family to explore and reflect on the origins and evolution of human consciousness.
- 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.

- Recommit ourselves to our contemplative stance and to living simply, so that the children of all species will have a home.

Clearly there is enough here to keep us occupied for a lifetime! Perhaps you have made great headway in one or more of these areas; while not paying too much attention to others. Or, perhaps you simply have not yet begun to consider where you stand in terms of the reality of global warming because you questioned just how pressing it was. In this and

subsequent issues of this newsletter, as well as in the bi-monthly Domlife updates, we will make an effort to focus on particular dimensions of the dilemma, in the hope of creating a critical mass among us so that we can speak with one voice and act with one heart on this most critical challenge of our times. In the words of our sister, St. Catherine of Siena, “...it is silence that kills the world”.

So let’s begin by taking a brief look at one of the above - **our dependency on fossil fuel - and consider what Earth might be asking of us in this regard.**

Our Dependency on Fossil Fuel

Margaret Mayce, OP

Earth, our only home, is habitable because of an exquisite natural balance. An insulating blanket of greenhouse gases (GHG) surrounds it, trapping just the right amount of the sun’s energy to maintain surface temperatures that are supportive of life. When this delicate balance is tampered with, life is literally held in the balance. Since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution in the 1700s, this balance has been increasingly, and alarmingly altered. Human activities are emitting more and more greenhouse gases into Earth’s atmosphere, increasing the insulating effect. It does not matter how quickly or slowly these emissions take place. What matters is **how much we emit**; and it would seem that we

are at the tipping point, or, what some have referred to as the “**climate cliff.**” Climate scientists have directly linked rising greenhouse gas emissions to the burning of coal, oil and gas for energy and heat; land use changes such as deforestation, landfills, and agricultural practices. There is simply “**too much carbon**” in our atmosphere. So, common sense would dictate that we need to cut-back, wouldn’t it?

UN Kyoto Protocol

The annual UN Framework Convention on Climate Change concluded its session in Doha, Qatar in December with a disappointing outcome. Last year in Durban, South Africa, the parties agreed to work toward an extension of the **Kyoto Protocol** beyond its 2012



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expiration date. This was the only binding international agreement to regulate climate change through reduction in greenhouse gas emissions. The United States never signed on; one reason being that Kyoto assigned reduction targets to developed countries, but not to the then-emerging economies – China, India and Brazil being primary. Now, it is China who is in fact the world’s largest greenhouse gas emitter, with the U.S. a close second. Developing countries are, in fact, obliged to cut pollution according to the UN Climate Convention – but only as enabled by support from the developed world in the form of funding and the transfer of clean technologies. However, the outcome of Doha did not provide for a mechanism to handle such aid, much to the great disappointment of the

developing world.

Wake Up Call

The Foreign Minister of the tiny Pacific nation of Nauru said, “This certainly isn’t where we need to be in order to prevent islands from going under.” The island nation of Kiribati is in the process of negotiating to re-settle its entire population in Fiji, because rising sea levels threaten its existence. Here in the U.S., the East Coast is still reeling from the effects of Hurricane Sandy, which in many respects has served as a “wake up call,” helping many to connect the dots between extreme weather patterns and our warming planet.

A Moral Obligation

Nonetheless, the disconnect between the level of ambition shown in Doha among our world leaders and what needs to happen to avoid climate disasters is profound.

At the Copenhagen climate talks in 2009, there was widespread agreement that global warming must be kept to less than 2 degrees Celsius in order to avert disaster. In other words, fossil fuel companies need to keep most of the oil, coal and gas in the ground. What are the chances of that really happening? While it is true that all countries, rich and poor alike, must act now, it is a moral obligation for countries like our own, who are more responsible for global warming and more capable of dealing with its consequences, to act first.

The new Protocol would require action on the part of all countries, and would enter force by the year 2020. However, the meeting in Doha failed to produce an outline of what this proposed new Protocol would contain.

Corporate World and Greenhouse Gas Emissions

*Pat Daly, OP (Caldwell)
Executive Director Tri-State
Coalition for Responsible
Investment*



*Heel dragging on
climate change will no
longer be tolerated.*

Climate change is a moral issue for many, but particularly so for the religious investors at the **Interfaith Center for Corporate Responsibility (ICCR)**, who have made it a priority since the 1980s. While some companies we engage with clearly lag behind their peers (like Exxon Mobil), there are others, like Ford, that are setting the bar for their sectors on emissions targets and on new product development. As a result of ICCR’s advocacy, climate risk calculations and greenhouse gas emissions reduction targets are now accepted industry norms.

Congregations of Dominican

Sisters have been active Members of the ICCR for four decades. Twenty five years ago corporations first heard of global warming from their faith-based shareholders. Today, under mounting public pressure, members of the ICCR insists that companies respond to the urgent need to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions.

With growing evidence of man-made contributions to global warming, Congregations of Dominican Sisters together with their colleagues at the ICCR are calling on asset owners to use their voices and their votes to push for

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stricter GHG reduction goals and to accelerate investments in renewable energy.

ICCR members are sponsoring **28 climate-related proposals** this proxy season. Several focus on obvious industries like extractives and utilities. Others, targeting big box retailers, food retailers, the energy-intensive IT sector, and the financial services sector – with its power to drive investments in green energy

solutions – move into new territory.

While climate change resolutions have garnered increasing support over the years, industry as a whole has been slow to adopt meaningful changes in spite of intensifying weather events and the documented savings that result from a reduced carbon footprint. ICCR members are exhorting shareholders to exercise their votes this proxy

season to send a signal to management that heel dragging on climate change will no longer be tolerated.

What Can You Do Right Here, Right Now?

To calculate your personal carbon footprint and learn how to reduce your impact on global warming, visit this link (courtesy of the Congregation of Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace): <http://tiny.cc/csjpgcarbonus>

Ending Child Marriage:

An Event that Reinvigorated My Faith in Affecting Social Change

Kati Garrison, DVUSA

For the past three months, I have benefited from the privilege of working with Margaret Mayce at the Dominican Leadership Conference. In all honesty, I entered into this placement with a somewhat cynical view of the United Nations; I regarded the organization as one without teeth, an entity that generates resolutions that lack follow through and enforcement. Over the course of these past few months, I encountered a number of reasons to support my cynicism, such as exposure to the politicking nature and the self promoting and aggrandizing behavior of various participants. At times, I must restrain the urge to roll my eyes at the hypocrisy of the words flowing out of the members' mouths (e.g., the president of Myanmar articulating the great strides his country exhibits in relation to democracy and equality, or the Australian delegate reporting on its championing of Aboriginal rights).

However, the more time I spend at the UN, the more I discover grounds to refute my skepticism. For example, I was fortunate enough to obtain a ticket to the opening of the General Assembly and witness the address by Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas. The display of support from the audience, in response to his plea for statehood, was remarkable. As of November 30th, Palestine has been upgraded to the status of a non-member state at the UN. In addition, as a part of the Working Group on Girls, the opportunity to partake in the first International Day of the Girl Child proved very rewarding. I distinctly recall feelings of amazement as I took my seat and



glanced up to the front of the room to see Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, NBC correspondent Ann Curry, and the head of UN Women Michelle Bachelet. I was awestruck.

Stolen Childhood

Girls across the globe cope with discrimination and violence, and few obstacles prove more detrimental to their well being than early marriage. According to UNICEF, every single day nearly 37,000 underage girls enter into wedlock. As articulated by Dr. Babatunde Osotimehin, the executive director of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), "Child marriage is an appalling violation of human rights and robs girls of their education, health, and

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long-term prospects. A girl who is married as a child is one whose potential will not be fulfilled." The repercussions of early marriage include, but are not limited to the following:

Increases Risk of Violence and Abuse

Frequently, parents living in impoverished conditions believe that child marriage will protect their daughters – provide a safe passage into adulthood – but as evidenced by the following consequences, the opposite is true. As expressed in the UNFPA publication *Marrying Too Young: End Child Marriage*, "Child marriage can be tantamount to bonded labour or enslavement. It can be a sentence to regular exposure to domestic or sexual violence, and a pathway to commercial exploitation."

Denial of Childhood

Child marriage precipitates a premature and unnatural end to a girl's childhood by inflicting adult roles and responsibilities before she is physically, psychologically, and emotionally prepared. The girls experience social isolation as they are separated from their family and friends. In some instances, the new husband transports his bride to her new home while obstructing her sight so that she cannot find her way home should she want to escape the marriage.

Disruption of Education

Child marriage generally results in a discontinuation of education. The new bride is expected to carry the burden of responsibilities in her new household including cooking, cleaning, and child rearing. This termination of learning greatly reduces the chance to develop skills to generate economic opportunities and income, thereby perpetuating the cycle of poverty.

Jeopardizes Health

Child marriage subjects girls to numerous sexual and reproductive health risks. Brides are expected to prove their fertility and as such are exposed to early, frequent, and forced sexual relations. In addition, the lack of access to health education results in increased occurrences of sexually transmitted infections such as HIV. These children also remain vulnerable to obstetric fistula, a condition that causes chronic pain, vulnerability to infection, incontinence, and most often a stillborn baby (leading to rejection by their husbands). Moreover, in developing countries complications from early pregnancy and childbirth remain the principal cause of death among adolescent girls.

Fosters Feelings of Powerlessness

Child brides commonly enter into marriage experiencing feelings of fear and powerlessness, which are compounded by abrupt changes in her life that she possesses no control over, such as the complete isolation from her birth family. Additionally, a typically wide age gap exists between the bride and her significantly older husband. This further reduces the child's ability to articulate or fight for her rights (if she is even aware that she has rights). The child bride depends on her husband and his family for all her daily needs and social interaction. If this family acts violently or abusively towards her, she often believes she has no option other than to suffer in silence. Birth families will

EARLY MARRIAGE



**Ghulam, 11
(Afghanistan)**

Ghulam and her soon-to-be husband, 40 year old Faiz. When asked how she felt on the day of her wedding, she replied, "I do not know this man. What am I supposed to feel?"



Nujood, 12 (Yemen)

At the age of 10, Nujood escaped from her abusive husband and took a taxi to the courthouse in Sanaa. She triumphed in the legal battle for divorce. Today, she lives at home with her family and is attending school.

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most likely refuse to support their daughter or accept her back into their home, and it remains highly unlikely for a community to intervene in these types of domestic problems.

Ending child marriage would save many girls' lives and promote education and the empowerment of girls. However, a number of factors contribute to the perpetuation of the practice of child marriage, ranging from cultural customs to poverty. The photojournalist Stephanie Sinclair wrote, "Laws, while necessary, are not sufficient in and of themselves to enable governments to mobilize against child marriage or to reconcile national laws with deeply entrenched practices." For example, many girls do not hold birth certificates or official registration documents. As a result, the application of protective legislation becomes difficult.

Despite such challenges, the United Nations meeting inspired hope to put an end to this practice. Desmond Tutu spoke about his organization **Girls Not Brides**, and the actions this

organization employs to combat child marriage. For instance, education exists as one of the most powerful tools in delaying the age at which girls enter into marriage. Consequently, organizations utilize cash incentives to encourage school attendance and participation. Education of girls also offers empowerment through opportunities to gain skills and economic options. This empowerment has already prompted a small number of girls to fight for their rights (at times even in the court system) and successfully prevent early marriage. Other preventative measures, endorsed by the UNFPA, include working in partnership with civil society to draw attention to the dangers posed to girls, to promote their rights, increase access to health information and services, encourage investments that expand girls' capabilities/skills and livelihood options, and find collective alternatives to discourage and eventually end the practice.

*For more information, please visit
www.girlsnotbrides.org*

Upcoming Events at the United Nations

- **March 4-15:** Commission on the Status of Women "Elimination and prevention of all forms of violence against women and girls"
At this event, DSI will be represented by Sisters: Cecilia Espenilla (Philippines), Corinne Sanders (North America), Edel Murphy (Ireland), Pamela Robles Espinoza (Peru), and Paulina Chioma Ogbonnaya (Nigeria)
- **March 21:** International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination
- **March 22:** World Water Day
- **April 7:** World Health Day
- **April 22:** International Mother Earth Day



*March 8:
International
Women's Day*

DOMINICAN LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE

Margaret Mayce, O.P., DLC/NGO Representative to the United Nations

Kati Garrison, Dominican Volunteer

211 East 43rd Street, Suite 704

New York, NY 10017

ngo@domlife.org (908) 227-2265