Recognizing and honoring the divine in a world out of balance

By Cecile Meijer, RSCJ

In his recent encyclical *Laudato Si',* Pope Francis makes an explicit call for a new dialogue about "how we are shaping the future of our planet." While some think of this mainly as a treatise on the planet, it in fact is not. It is a reminder of our responsibilities for our planet AND to the common good, to our brothers and sisters, especially the most vulnerable. Through our office at the United Nations, Religious of the Sacred Heart are ready to be part of this dialogue.

The Society of the Sacred Heart has been at the United Nations (UN) as a non-governmental organization (NGO) since 2003. Because the UN is an intergovernmental body, only nation states can be members of it, not NGOs. But NGOs can work with the UN and, in fact, they make a lot of noise to urge diplomats to listen to the voice of the people. A colleague once called our work "putting the Beatitudes in action."

The Society's presence at the UN stems from a desire to do something more global with our vast experience of living and working with people in forty-one countries. As educators we tend to look at root causes of problems; that tendency led us to want to bring our reflection and analysis to the international policy table in New York.

Personal conversion is of course the corner stone, but we also need structural change at all levels of governance.

Last year the Society obtained consultative status with the Economic and Social Council of the UN. This status opens the way to lobby and advocate with UN Member States using the lived experience from our members around the world. Telling people's stories matters – their hopes and dreams and struggles and pains, real life stories. Drawing policy recommendations for change from those stories is a powerful contribution to our common quest for systemic change.

So why is this important?

Why are we called to this role in the global community? You can find the reason in the daily news: scenes of violence, extreme weather, out-of-control contagious diseases affecting hundreds of thousands of people. Around one billion people still live in extreme poverty today, our brothers and sisters who cannot care for their most basic human needs.
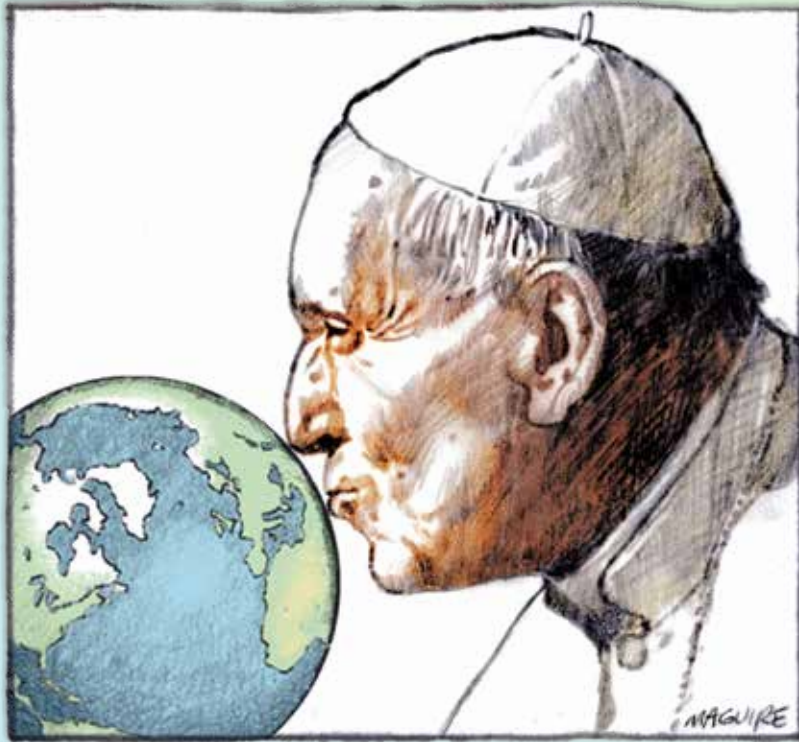
At the same time, our world is highly interconnected in more ways than just the internet. International trade, financial markets, and, in general, global mobility have given us access to previously unimaginable progress and wealth. But the advances have been wildly unequal, both within countries and among countries.

So where is our solidarity?

Where is our focus on the common good in such a world out of balance? How can we concretely live out our preferential option for the poor, recognizing on a daily basis the human dignity of each person? How do we recognize and honor the divine in all of creation?

Pope Francis writes in *Laudato Si'* that "God is intimately present in each being," making it possible for us to "see God reflected in all that exists." He continues: "The bishops of Brazil have pointed out that nature as a whole not only manifests God but is also a locus of his presence. The Spirit of life dwells in every living creature and calls us to enter into relationship with him." (para. 88). The presence of God in all of creation is not only repeated over and over again in Scripture, but God's life-giving breath has also been the sustaining energy throughout history, from the very beginning of creation when God breathed over the chaos (Genesis 1) to our own chaos of today.

Barrie Maguire, newsart.com

Respect for each living being on Planet Earth – people, plants, animals, etc. – as God's dwelling place breaks down walls and prejudices and brings healing to broken relationships. If justice is understood in the biblical sense of right relationships, tangible love and respect express themselves as justice, mercy and humility. The acknowledgement of God as the heartbeat in all created beings then becomes a way to peace. Let me give just one example.

If we really recognize Christ in the Syrian refugee, desperate to reach a safe Greek island on an inflatable boat, we cannot turn away because we are 'suffering-fatigued.' Little Aylan's lifeless body was Christ lying at the seashore face down. The opposite of love is not hate, a friend once told me, but indifference. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) estimates that 650,460 refugees and migrants have reached Europe (Greece, Malta, Italy or Spain) this year so far (mid October). More than 3,100 of them are estimated not to have survived their perilous journey across the Mediterranean Sea. Unlike other times, Greece has been the port of entry to Europe for more than half a million refugees and migrants in 2015.

It is time to recognize that God lives in every single woman, man, girl or boy who is being trafficked. Love dwells in the fisherman whose house will soon be wiped away by yet another disastrously strong typhoon. Christ sleeps in the park because there is still no room in the inn. Recognizing the divine presence as indwelling in all people and living beings will surely change us and it can also change the world. We all have a role to play in mending ruptured relationships and restoring our oneness as humanity.

In late September of this year, all 193 Member States of the UN have adopted new universal goals for sustainable development – the Sustainable Development Goals or SDGs. Watch for renewed calls to end poverty, fight injustice, improve inclusivity and protect our environment. You can be sure that, in our role as an NGO at the UN, the Society will be part of the conversation, promoting justice and compassion. You, too, can be part of that dialogue through your prayer and actions, no matter how small. As Pope Francis said, "We need to strengthen the conviction that we are one single human family" – we cannot allow leaving anyone behind. ✤

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