



Society of the Sacred Heart
United States – Canada

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Reflections on Our Environment Following Hurricane Sandy

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Several years ago at a Provincial Assembly, the U.S. Province endorsed the Earth Charter “promising our support to build a just, sustainable, and peaceful global society in the 21st century.” We committed to help create a global partnership at a critical juncture in history. The Earth Charter's ethical vision proposes that environmental protection, human rights, equitable human development, and peace are interdependent and indivisible. The Charter attempts to provide a new framework for thinking about and addressing these issues.

Following Superstorm Sandy, New York's Governor Andrew Cuomo said that "Climate change is a reality. Extreme weather is a reality. It is a reality that we are vulnerable." At last, Sandy has emboldened some political leaders to recognize that the earth is in crisis mode. But most people seem to be unaware that Sandy represents a profound change in our relationship to the Earth. More of us need to recognize that we are witnessing profound change in our earth. Today we need help from religion to preserve God's precious Earth.

Religious groups across the country are known for their efforts and contributions to preserve the environment. Outstanding faith-based sustainability efforts include Greenfaith and Interfaith Power and Light. Many more resources are compiled online by the Interfaith Consortium for Ecological Civilization (ICEC), at www.ic4ec.org. Faith-based environmental work at the United Nations and at June's Rio +20 conference all offer ways to engage in faith-based environmental activism.

Thomas Berry, SJ, was an 'eco-theologian' (though he preferred the term 'geologian') who believed that the changes we are experiencing today (climate change being one) are geological in their magnitude. As he put it, we are bringing to an end the Cenozoic Era (or Industrial Age) which is the period when life as we know it, with its mammals, and flowers and humans, flourished. The future – what he calls the Ecozoic (or Ecological) Era – will be defined as an earth-centered period, in the sense that things will flourish insofar as they relate creatively with the earth and its dynamics. The future for humans, for example, will be determined by mutually enhancing human-earth relations.

We need to connect the dots. Big Oil makes record profits because it can freely pollute. Fossil fuel pollution causes climate change. And climate change is loading the dice for more extreme weather like Hurricane Sandy. Runaway Profits = More Carbon = Climate Disaster. Had we invested in alternative energies perhaps long lines waiting to “gas up” would not be a major result of storms like Sandy.

The fact is that millions of people are suffering and will suffer much more if we don't attend to the obvious. With everyone else, religious institutions will have to get the message out that our earth is changing, moving from an industrial age where it was ok to exhaust earth's seemingly endless resources. We are approaching planetary limits and we have to humbly find ways to respond to messages from the earth.

It is time to recognize the need for mutually enhancing relations not only between humans but between humans and everything else: a continuous, creative conversation among all the stakeholders of our shared world in order to truly address the present, unprecedented order of change we face. How often was the word “unprecedented” used in the various descriptions of and commentaries about the storm?

I am writing this because I'm aware of the deep love and compassion that Religious of the Sacred Heart and members of the Sacred Heart family have for all people. But everyone's well-being is in jeopardy unless we humans begin to understand our interdependence with the Earth. I think I have received the Earth message as a passion and pray that we will awaken to our personal and communal responsibility to develop a lifestyle consistent with our interdependence with the Earth.

~ Sr. Joan Kirby
United Nations Representative
The Temple of Understanding

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Society of the Sacred Heart, United States - Canada

Address: 4120 Forest Park Avenue, St. Louis, MO 63108

Phone: 314.652.1500

Fax: 314.534.6800



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