

EARTH DAY 2020 REFLECTION

By Sister Mary Tee

April 22, 2020, marks the 50th anniversary of Earth Day.

Who would have thought a few months ago that the celebration of this milestone to unite the focus of millions of people throughout the world for the care and protection of Earth, our Planet Home, would be taking place in the midst of an entirely new reality, one in which a small virus, COVID-19, would have the power to put just about the whole world in isolation or lockdown? It has humbled us to know that as yet the keenest minds, the most progressive medical techniques, the most advanced technology or the finest military have not been able to deter its rapid advance. This new reality further brings home to us the fact that we humans are not the masters, owners, controllers of life here in this world but that all is of God.

This tiny microbe is bringing us face to face with our own mortality and that of our loved ones, friends and communities throughout the world. It is also waking us up to the truth of who we are as one communion of God's body, Earth. It is showing us more clearly that we must ever be mindful that we belong to Earth, our mother. She nourishes, supports and guides us, and in her we are connected to every species and every living system in a harmonious love and reverence revealed to us through our God. This level of consciousness is a constant reminder of the intimate connection we have with our brothers and sisters in the sacredness of all life and our responsibility to further ethical values for the care of Earth, values which are not based only on the material acquisition of goods.

History shows us that in earlier times humanity lived this intimate connection with the larger community of all life. However, as a result of the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment, the wonder, awe, amazement and the intuitive way of reflecting on the mystery of God's creation began to give way to reason over intuition and reliance on factual and verifiable information, ushering in a mechanistic view of life and opening the way for the Industrial Revolution. At this time, connections to the deeper realities of life were weakened, thereby obscuring the sacred and the holy, and setting a path for a materialistic worldview.

We have now arrived at a place on this planet where we have the power to enhance or to destroy life itself. We know from the United Nations International Panel on Climate Change that human activity has developed into a destructive power, global in scope. It is also a fact that as a result of the large amount of Green House Gas in the atmosphere Earth's temperature is rising, making vulnerable the very life that sustains us. However, Pope Francis reminds us that while we are capable of the worst, we are also capable of rising above ourselves, choosing once again what is good and making a new start. (*Laudato Si'*, 205) So, on this Earth Day there is hope that the world will mobilize for greater action to prevent further global warming.

Presently there are many unanswered questions regarding COVID-19 and how it has infected humans. It appears to have originated at a live-animal market in Wuhan, China. Another

possibility is that it may have been transferred to humans through the farming and slaughter of wild animals. Presently China has put a temporary ban on this industry and Vietnam has announced the closure of all its wildlife markets. All of this is a wake-up call, reminding us of the kind of relationship we ought to have with animals.

Pope Francis is asking us “to become painfully aware, to dare to turn what is happening to our world into our own personal suffering” (*LS 19*), and COVID-19 has brought us to do just that. Its severe misery, fear and anxiety is forcing “each of us to discover what we can do about it”. (*LS 19*.) In our powerlessness, we are realizing how connected we need to be cognitively and spiritually as we depend on the goodwill of the global community to self-isolate; to wash their hands frequently and to maintain social distancing. The suffering experienced through the tragic loss of loved ones, the courageous sacrifices made daily by front-line workers and the loneliness of mere physical separation brings a yearning for closer connections and calls us to make a radical change in the way we view ourselves in relation to the rest of creation.

In our attempts to prevent the extremely disturbing spread of COVID-19 there are uplifting moments of unexpected small acts of kindness in which deep down we are revealing our true selves as loving and compassionate people, finding creative ways to show forth generosity in a caring, more empathetic manner. In all of this it becomes apparent how suffering often calls forth the best in humanity and how through suffering we can be led into the strengths of our inner being. Here, too, in these transformative moments there is a nudge to surrender past ways of thinking and behaving whereby attitudes of selfishness and greed, competition and dominance are gradually being transformed into a unity and harmony with each other and with other inhabitants of the Earth community. In this milieu there is a deepening-awareness that we are meant to flourish together as one community of all life, sharing a common destiny.

Could it be that the Coronavirus is calling humanity to the next stage in our evolutionary history? Perhaps it is providing the impetus for an evolutionary leap which will bring to reality the transformation so needed in our world today. Could the present situation be an invitation to respond to the challenge to expand our worldview and ethics for a more inclusive understanding of our collective presence as a species in a universe that is alive and dynamic? From the New Universe Story, we are beginning to understand more profoundly, as revealed by scientists and as given meaning by theologians, that we humans share a common origin with all species. With this new understanding, we Christians are challenged to broaden Jesus’ message of the oneness of all life of which he spoke at the Last Supper and which we now understand was intended to be inclusive of all life. If we truly awaken to this reality with a deeper understanding of the unimaginable possibilities contained in these words of Jesus, the whole of humanity could begin to chart a new course in today’s world.

Could not this virus be ushering us into a moment of transition which Paul Roskir of Tellus Institute terms “The Great Transition”, or which author and deep ecology scholar, Joanna Macy, names the “Great Turning”? Experience shows that some of the bleakness and darkest experiences brought about by diseases such as the Black Death, Yellow Fever, Smallpox often brought transformation and change and even progress. And so, we ask ourselves, will this “new normal” which we are experiencing during the upheaval of COVID-19 shift the systems of

domination, greed and violence which lie at the root of environmental degradation and so many other ills of this world? Will we in this slow pace of time use this opportunity, as poet, and social justice activist, Sonya Renee Taylor, suggests to “stitch together a new garment,” one that will fit all of humanity and all of nature?

COVID-19 has shown us that when humanity comes together around a common cause, great things can happen. A sense of hope, so palpable during the Easter and Spring Seasons, is emerging as the curve of the virus is beginning to show signs of flattening in some parts of the world and discussions around preparing to slowly lift the restrictions are being heard. Coupled with this is the surprising and reassuring news that by refraining from many of our usual activities, we are also reducing the amount of Green House Gas in the atmosphere. Even if we cannot celebrate Earth Day in the way that was planned, Earth itself has much more to celebrate on this 50th anniversary of Earth Day than ever before. The skies over China have never been clearer as the smog has disintegrated during this time of rest from the fossil fuel industry and factory operations. India is also reporting that if the sky, now so blue, becomes any clearer, they will soon be able to see God, and in Venice fish can be seen through the crystal clear water in the canals since the sediment has settled to the bottom as a result of the inactivity of boat traffic with the halt of the tourist industry.

If as a result of this virus we have awakened to a more wholistic worldview and a better consciousness of the need to align ourselves with an all-embracing harmonious relationship with all of creation as taught by St. Francis and promoted by Pope Francis then we will be able to look back at this period in history, Earth Day 2020, as a Sacred moment and go forth into the future realizing more profoundly who we are in this one community of all life.

Let us recite together this excerpt from a poem intitled **Earth Speaks** by Marie Kettle

EARTH SPEAKS

And I've made the world stop in its tracks.
I've made YOU finally listen.
I've made you take refuge.
I've made you stop thinking about materialistic things..

Now you are like the earth...
You are only worried about YOUR survival.

How does that feel?

I give you fever ... as the fires burn on earth.
I give you respiratory issues, as pollution fills the earth's air.
I give you weakness as the earth weakens every day.

I took away your comforts...
Your outings.

The things you would use to forget about the planet and its pain.

And I made the world stop...

And now...

YOU are having to take time to reflect on what is important in your life.

Again I am not here to punish you ... I am here to Awaken you...

When all this is over and I am gone...

Please remember these moments....

Listen to the earth.

Listen to your soul.

Stop Polluting the earth.

Stop Fighting amongst each other.

Stop caring about materialistic things.

And start loving your neighbours.

Start caring about the earth and all its creatures.

Start believing in a Creator.

Signed,

Coronavirus