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Widening our practice of mercy

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Eco Catholic

When I get stopped for speeding and the cop is sauntering to my car, I always pray like the dickens -- God, please let him have mercy on me and give me a warning instead of a ticket! In my powerlessness, every part of my distressed being pleads for leniency, which I usually don't get, but I can't help trying.

We all know what it's like to be the one asking for mercy, the feelings of fear and desperation and the humbling bargaining and begging. And we know what it's like being asked for a break. (If we're parents, we're probably on that side of the fence fairly often!) We know the feeling of a hard-hearted refusal to an anguished request, and also the grace of softening our stance and granting an undeserved favor.

The idea of mercy is not simple. It's similar to pity, compassion, and forgiveness, but not quite the same. It has its own depth, nuances and flavor. I think it is clear, though, that it is a virtue to be courted. The scriptures state that God's mercy reaches to the heavens, recount how Jesus granted mercy to sick and sinner alike, and admonish us to be unstinting in showing mercy.

Thus we come to the celebration of Divine Mercy Sunday, seeking to make it more than mere words. I want to affirm the traditional focus of the day and to suggest a wider application of mercy than is normally considered -- praying for and extending God's mercy to the suffering Earth.

It's only been recently that consciousness of our obligations to the natural world has arisen. Sin was considered a matter between God and humans, humans and humans, but not humans and the Earth and its life. But now we know otherwise.

God is asking us to enlarge our hearts and concern to include all of creation, as God does, and to show it mercy. God and the Earth are silently, and sometimes boldly and urgently, pleading with us to show compassion and stop inflicting such widespread death, destruction, and suffering.

It would be so valuable if we could feel the pain of the hurting planet, what it must be like to be an ocean coping with over-acidity and plastic trash, overwhelmed plants trying to take in excess carbon dioxide, animals suffering and dying from loss of habitat, and maimed rain forests struggling for integrity, their core cut out. Perhaps we would be less callous in our disregard of the natural world if we could walk in its shoes for a day.

We've all seen movies where the bully, who terrorized some innocent kid without pity, finally has the tables turned and is at the mercy of the victim. We feel a kind of righteous satisfaction that some sense of justice has prevailed. Maybe we're a lot like that bully.

Increasingly, we humans are in the position of having to beg for mercy from God and creation. Once, feeling totally powerful and in control, we meted out whatever punishment we wished toward creation without fear of reprisal. Now we are finding that we aren't as invincible as we supposed. Creation has a way of balancing the scales, of fighting back, of causing us immense suffering and death, as recent natural disasters have shown.

It's time we started seriously acknowledging our collective sins against creation and sincerely and humbly asking for pardon. One of the times I do this is when I pray with heartfelt supplication the Lord, Have Mercy at the Eucharist.

If we are sincere in asking for forgiveness and wanting to repent and do no more harm, then surely God will answer our prayer. Despairing of our ability to change or deeming the situation irredeemable is hardly what God wants. The decline of the Earth is not inevitable. We might pray a little harder if we ponder the fact that the fate of the Earth and ours is the same.

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I want to end with this prayer from my friend Rev. Helen Nelson, written for her Easter service.

Ever-creating God, we rejoice this day in the newness of life made possible because of Christ's resurrection. In the beginning, by your very word, all creation was spoken into being. But that which you have pronounced as good has been damaged by the ones you trusted to care for it. We have harmed others. We have harmed creation. We have harmed ourselves.

We pray for all who are hurting because of us. Forgive us our sins and help us to be the good caregivers you commanded us to be. Empower us to speak and act on behalf of the world you created that we too may call it good.

In the waters of the Jordan River, Jesus showed us at his baptism our need for repentance; show us how to restore polluted waters that you created to be cleansing and refreshing.

In the wilderness of temptation, Jesus refused to turn stones into bread; help us to resist the urge exploit rock and mineral resources in ways that render the earth unsuitable for food production.

From the mud of the earth, Jesus healed the man who was blind from birth; help us to respect the bio-cultures of the soil so that it may nourish diverse eco-systems to sustain a vital healthy planet.

In the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus inhaled the fragrance of flowers as he awaited death; enable us to tend the garden you have entrusted to us that we may enjoy its beauty and that we may

experience the fullness of life on earth.

In the name of the risen Christ, who sustains all who are faithful. Amen.

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