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The crucifixion below the surface of the sea

by Jamie Manson

Grace on the Margins

Six years ago, when I decided to leave my native borough of Queens, N.Y., and move to a barrier island 25 miles southeast of Manhattan, I was looking for peace. I was working 60 hours a week with New York City's street homeless population. After seeing the crucified God in the faces our of broken, suffering guests all day, I found that seeing God's magnificence and beauty in the ocean was a helpful way to recharge my psychic batteries after a long week.

But lately, those evening walks on the shore have become more troubling than tranquil. When a busy beach weekend draws to a close, one can hardly walk five steps without spotting empty water bottles, Styrofoam cups, plastic bags, deflated Mylar balloons, and even car tires strewn along the sand or washing up in the sea foam.

Nowadays, almost every walk my partner and I take becomes an impromptu beach cleanup. Yes, people frequently look at us like we're nuts as we comb the beach for trash. And our efforts might be futile in the face of the estimated millions of tons of plastics that are currently in the ocean. But if we can spare one sea creature from mistakenly ingesting a Fritos bag or getting tied up in balloon ribbon or fishing nets, the effort seems more than worthwhile. Each piece of plastic is a burden on our consciences.

As we walk, the increasing weight of our garbage bags feels like the weight of sin. What should have been time spent contemplating God's extraordinary gift of creation becomes an occasion for melancholic reflection on the selfishness and carelessness of human beings. My partner imagines that those who abuse nature in this life will be sentenced to cleaning up the coastlines of purgatory.

Once those plastics become adrift in the sea, most will be driven into currents and formed into large patches of floating debris. According to *National Geographic*, the largest of those patches, known as the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, is said to be twice the size of Texas. It extends, at times, from Japan to San

Francisco.

The real problem with these patches is that they aren't made up of large pieces of plastic, but rather, of plastics that have decayed and broken down into grain-sized bits. Any attempt to clean the patches also runs the risk of sweeping up plankton, "which provides the basis for the marine food chain and half of the photosynthesis on Earth," *National Geographic* writes. Rather than plankton, marine animals often end up with a mouthful of the toxic remnants of, say, a Target bag.

Scientists at the University of California, Santa Barbara are currently studying how much ocean trash is generated from developed and developing countries. They suspect that a substantial amount of the rubbish comes from poorer countries that lack garbage collections systems. The oceans, it seems, are victims of poverty, too.

Sadly, plastic isn't the only pollutant going into the ocean by the millions of tons. The oceans absorb as much as 30 percent of the carbon sent into the atmosphere through the burning of fossil fuels. That's millions of tons of carbon dioxide per day. As carbon levels increase, so does the acidity of the ocean. (As Colman McCarthy demonstrated recently in a sobering *NCR* essay, we are all culpable for this pollution.)

In the 150 years since the Industrial Revolution, the ocean's acidity has risen by 26 percent, the fastest rate in 300 million years. Scientists predict it could increase by 100 percent to 150 percent by the year 2100.

The increasing acidification warms and deoxygenates the water. It also compromises marine animals that build their shells out of calcium carbonate, like corals and oysters. Off the California coast, the change in the chemistry of seawater is suspected to have damaged or destroyed the larvae of oysters and sea urchins.

Even in the face of these two massive hazards to the oceans' health, marine ecologists say overfishing is the greatest threat to seas' survival. Aggressive, profit-seeking commercial fishing fleets have systemically depleted the ocean of 90 percent of its fish stocks since the mid-20th century. According to the journal *Science*, all of the world's fisheries could collapse by 2048. The oceans are victims of corporate greed, too.

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The good news is that the Obama administration, most notably Secretary of State John Kerry, is well aware of this unfolding crisis. On Monday and Tuesday, Kerry hosted political and corporate leaders from 80 countries at a global conference on saving the oceans.

Kerry opened the summit by urging officials to take immediate action. "The protection of the oceans is a vital international security issue," he said. The human damage done to the seas, he also indicated, is jeopardizing the food security of 3 billion people on the planet.

At the conclusion of the conference, President Barack Obama announced that he will sign an executive order making "a broad swath of the central Pacific Ocean off-limits to fishing, energy exploration and other activities," *The Washington Post* reported. "The proposal, slated to go into effect later this year after a comment period, could create the world's largest marine sanctuary and double the area of ocean globally that is fully protected."

Obama is also directing federal agencies to develop a program to fight seafood fraud and the black-market fish trade.

Those of us who flock to the beach each summer know the gifts that the sea offers: peace, relaxation, playfulness, refreshment, beauty. But it is important to remember that the ocean also provides us with the gift of life itself.

"If the oceans die, we die," Paul Watson, founder of the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society, said in a recent interview. The havoc we wreak in the seas threatens the very fate of the human species. Without living oceans, civilization will collapse.

Six years after moving close to the sea to find respite from a crucified humanity, I now realize that, just below its surface, the ocean is no less a victim of crucifixion. Like many of my homeless friends, the sea has been victimized by poverty, greed, abuse and negligence.

Also like the homeless, the oceans need education programs and the political will to create stronger, smarter policies. They need sanctuaries to promote their healing. Most of all, they need human beings who are willing to respect, honor and protect the presence of God that dwells within them.

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