



Program of the Franciscan Action Network (FAN) and  
the National Religious Coalition on Creation Care (NRCCC)  
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*So what we do to the oceans, God's vast blue Creation,  
we do to God's other creations, including ourselves...*  
Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, June 7, 2003

Camp Mokule'ia, North Shore, Oahu, Hawaii

October 21-26, 2012

At the very core of all religious stirrings and traditions is the acknowledgement that we did not create this universe, and that we are beholden and duty-bound to the Mysterious and Infinite Creator who did. Therefore we cannot harm the life that has been created without great moral, spiritual, physical, social and economic consequences. If religion is to speak authentically on anything, it must speak about life and about systematic threats to our world and all of creation upon it. This is why religious leaders such as Pope John Paul II and many others have proclaimed unequivocally, "The ecological crisis is a moral crisis!"

Since the present destruction of the ocean systems and species is undermining the foundational systems that support all life on earth, the voice of religion cannot be silent about the oceans. It must speak out emphatically and prophetically, calling all to repentance and action and transformation. This, coupled with climate change, are two of the largest spiritual, moral, and justice issues on the planet as they are related to all other life issues. And the physical and ecological indicators show us we have no time to spare. We must speak and act *now*. We have delayed too long already.

Historically, religion has had a role in every major American movement for rights and responsibility. From the framing of the Declaration and Constitution, to the Abolitionist Movement to Women's Rights, to the War against Poverty and Civil Rights, religion has provided the moral, ethical and spiritual underpinnings and rationale. Now religion has turned to the very foundation of life and religion itself—the garden of this planet. The oceans, which are unseen in their depths, are integrally connected to all life on land through the weather, water, and food systems, and they are being eaten away at their integral systems by commercial, governmental, and personal actions and inactions. That is why there is a need for an articulation of a religious ethic of the oceans, to frame a moral guide to action, and direct moral counsel on its application to the current ocean destruction.

As in all past American movements, the calls for change reflect failures in societal assumptions about who we are and who we include in our structures of rights and responsibilities. Each movement has called for a deeper understanding of our sense of connection and mutuality. As Martin Luther King Jr, wrote in his "Letter from Birmingham Jail", "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a

single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly." If we are to resolve our ecological crises, it will not be by just changing a few light bulbs or similar small actions, though those actions are important. It will instead be because we have enlarged our worldview to see the connections. We must repair the way we see our relationship to nature's systems and other species, and to the poor and women who are most harmed by nature's degradations.

As an interfaith group from the National Religious Coalition for Creation Care (NRCCC), we traveled to an Episcopal camp on the shore of Oahu to seek scientific, cultural, and spiritual knowledge of the oceans and to prayerfully discern an ocean ethic. Participants represented a spectrum of faith groups, including Roman Catholic, Jewish, Evangelical Christian, Protestant, Eastern Orthodox Christian, and Native Hawaiian, plus scientists, artists, and others who participated and acted as consultants. We see religion, science, and art as partners in seeking spiritual, moral and practical solutions.

On the first day of our exploration, we were welcomed at Camp Mokule'ia on the north shore of Oahu by the jeweled turquoise blue sea. We met a Hawaiian father and three boys fishing. The youngest proudly showed us a small octopus he had caught, letting us gently hold the creature. The octopus is the Hawaiian symbol of wisdom, as it reaches out in eight directions for a comprehensive perspective. This encounter set the scene for many things to come.

Less than an hour later, an endangered green sea turtle crawled onto the beach for a rest in the sun. We worried about frightening him, but inched forward for a closer view, talking softly to him in reassurance. To our amazement, he responded, paddling in the sand toward us, staring into our eyes the entire time. His eyes seemed sad, and when he turned, we saw with horror a large bright pink tumor protruding from his jaw. (We learned that this is a frequent condition because of the nutrients and chemicals that run off local pineapple, sugarcane, and other agricultural fields.) In this moment, something passed between us; our responsibility became intimate and personal. We hope to pass this personal feeling of connection to the oceans through this ethic, even to those who cannot visit the ocean as we did.

Native Hawaiians call this loving connection "*aloha*." "*Alo*," means heart of the universe, and "*ha*," the breath of God. This is the traditional Hawaiian exchange of spirit, respect, and honor. It is similar to the Eastern concept of *namaste* -- I honor the God in you. Jewish believers are taught to greet strangers as Elijah. The Jewish theologian Martin Buber called this the "I-Thou" relationship, where suddenly the I is related to thou, and vice versa. For Christians, Christ is in all creation and one is to discern Christ in each person as well as in every species and element in nature. "All things came to be through Him." Jesus taught his followers how to pray using the words "our", "we," and "us:", and not "my", "I" and "me." God's "our", "we", and "us" embraces all of creation. We are all in this together on this planet, beyond borders of religion, culture, nation, color, age, time, and species.

Too often, this vision of natural sacredness is forgotten as religious traditions tangle with secular assumptions, narrow dogma, or wrangle with political agendas. When we forget this sacred spirit of God alive in the universe, we see the world only as something to exploit for profit, convenience, whimsy, or recreation, with no limits to our use. The consequences harm all of us. The ocean systems and species are now in such a deteriorating condition that as they degrade, our lives and livelihoods become buffeted by storms, droughts, and toxicity, threats to public health, the collapsing of marine species and markets, and the loss of places and species of beauty and worth. This is why we, as people of faith, together with you, must speak out strongly together to remind all people of our serious moral and religious obligation to care for the systems and species of the oceans. And we must work through restorative actions and justice to renew the face of the earth, engaging the poor, especially women, as creative actors with local expertise and understanding to share.

In this, we take a lesson from the octopus and seek to reach out in many directions – across political, religious, economic, class, culture, and species lines. This conveys a caring for all of nature and each other, just as God cares for all of creation. We are to take seriously our privileges of living in this glorious world with all the varieties of life and the responsibilities imbedded within it.

Thus, we urge all religious and spiritual leaders, institutions, organizations and congregations, and individuals to sign on to this interfaith ocean ethic or craft one of their own, and to study, teach, and preach about the responsibilities we must face and why. ***This is a core life issue, for if we do not act now, we are offering nothing for our unborn children.*** We must engage with the realities shown by science, pray for help and God's own Spirit, and ***become the change we seek.*** We must also band together to push for new cultural values and actions; to say no to pipelines, fracking, off shore drilling, and coal plants; and call for new public policies of ocean, land, and atmospheric restoration, reforestation, and grassland reconstruction. We must also put our money where our mouths are and divest as individuals, faith communities, seminarians, and universities in corporations that are involved in oil, gas, mining and deforestation. We must shift to alternative energies and earth repairing investments.

If we do not, we will find ourselves in spiritual and physical peril – not just because of an accounting with our Maker, not just because we will have neglected the needs of the poor of this world, and not just because our economic systems will unravel as the natural resources do, but also because ***our youth will turn from us in cynical disgust at our hypocrisy and selfishness*** – that we would pass on to them a world degraded and inhospitable to life because of our selfishness: our pollution, over waste, over exploitation, over harvesting, over development, and loss of species. ***They shall find religion irrelevant and impotent, and God's commands neglected.*** Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote from jail about this same problem. He was addressing Christian churches about civil rights and justice, but his words hold true

for all faiths and prophetic witnesses, and they hold true for the cause of creation care and ecological justice, working to free all the poor scourged and imprisoned by ocean and climate destruction they cannot control and did not fully cause:

*So often the contemporary church is a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. So often it is an archdefender of the status quo. Far from being disturbed by the presence of the church, the power structure of the average community is consoled by the church's silent--and often even vocal--sanction of things as they are.*

*But the judgment of God is upon the church as never before. If today's church does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, **it will lose its authenticity, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the twentieth century. Every day I meet young people whose disappointment with the church has turned into outright disgust.***

*Perhaps I have once again been too optimistic. Is organized religion too inextricably bound to the status quo to save our nation and the world? Perhaps I must turn my faith to the inner spiritual church, the church within the church, as the true eklesia and the hope of the world. But again I am thankful to God that some noble souls from the ranks of organized religion have broken loose from the paralyzing chains of conformity and joined us as active partners in the struggle...*

*I have no despair about the future. I... We will win ... because the sacred heritage of our nation and the eternal will of God are embodied in our echoing demands.*

That is why we must begin now. Together. If we stand together in prayer and action for a renewed and sustainable world for the future, and for the poor of this world and all species, our youth will become engaged in this work. Cynicism will fall away as they become aware of the sacredness of all of God's creation and feel God's presence with us and among us. So we have everything to gain and nothing to lose but the effort, which will transform us. For as the Lakota/Dakota Sioux say, "Mitukaye Oyasin", All My Relations, or we are all related in the circle of life. Alo-ha!