

Forum on Faith and A Sustainable Economy: The Churches' Contribution to the Voluntary  
Sector

Commission on Justice and Peace, The Canadian Council of Churches

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**A Witness to:**

**Theology, Public Ethics, and Public Policy in the Voluntary Sector**

I speak in the way that my elders have taught me. I share, not so you will be like me, but so that, having heard my stories and what is in my heart, you will be invited to look at how your theology and ethics influence your contribution.

The title to this morning's work feels a bit daunting. However, I hope that what I say gives you food for thought.

As a believer in Jesus Christ, and as a woman religious in the Roman Catholic tradition, I orient my life towards God daily. I look to God's Spirit to guide and sustain me through the word of God in scripture, and in the sacramentality of life. I believe strongly that faith, theology and ethics have a role in the transformation of society; that faith communities are called to bring about the reign of God in this world.

I think my theology is a practical one, more than academic. It has some very basic aspects; a few of which I will name. I will reflect on the much more inclusive kind of economics that we need in order to have a sustainable economy. Then I will identify some ethical responses that I think faith communities contribute.

I believe in a Trinitarian God who has created, and continues to create, out of love. For the life of all creation, this God has given *all, in love*. Through the incarnation, God has given us a lived example of ethical living and loving in the person of Jesus. That same God, whom I believe is transcendent, is also immanent. God is present in our world today. The Spirit of God indwells in all creation. I believe God desires that all creation be one in God, living life fully and abundantly. Jesus expressed that desire when he said: "Father, may they be one in us as you are in me and I am in you, so that the world may believe it was you who sent me."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The Jerusalem Bible John 17:21

My theology and my image of God have changed over the years. More recently, I have come to a new understanding of the story of the universe, the interconnectedness of all creation, and the dynamic of ever increasing consciousness. I believe that God calls us humans, not only to grow in consciousness, but also to participate in the work of transformation that brings fullness of life to all creation.

I would like to share with you three key messages that have shaped my theology.

The first is the words of Jesus:

**“I tell you solemnly, in so far as you did it to one of the least of these brothers or sisters of mine, you did it to me.”**<sup>2</sup>

I grew up with that teaching. My parents taught me, that how I treated my brothers and sisters *was really how I treated Jesus*. It was a way of teaching us the dignity of the person. It grounded faith in life. It also taught us one of the primary values of the Aboriginal peoples: respect.

In elementary school, my teachers - all Sisters of St. Joseph - gave me that same message, with the added influence of the charism of the Sisters of St. Joseph which is *Inclusive, Reconciling Love*.

In my local Church in the pre-Vatican II times, that scripture was framed as the way to avoid hellfire and damnation. It was also witnessed to, however, by the same townspeople who went to the Church. They consistently reached out to the neighbour in need. They were people of deep, practical faith. The belief that my relationships with others are a mirror, and a revelation, of my relationship with God is important to me today.

The second message that has influenced me was articulated by my novice director when I was a young Sister. She was preparing us to go out to teach. One day she said: **“Enter the mind and heart of a child knowing that God has been there before you.”**

That message influenced not only the way in which I taught children, but it has stayed with me. I believe it is now a part of the way I perceive anyone with whom I have contact. In my relations with others I need, *and I hope*, to enter their world, their reality, knowing that God has already been there, long before I came on the scene. In some ways this teaching added a *concrete context* for my desire to treat others with deep respect and to recognize that the God to whom I relate, is one who self reveals, visibly and tangibly in the person of others.

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<sup>2</sup> The Jerusalem Bible Matt. 25: 40

The third message is one that struck me at a retreat. I heard the words of Karl Rahner, who said: **“The Christian of the future will be a mystic or nothing at all.”**

I think he was saying that being a Christian would involve a personal choice to be open and vulnerable to Incomprehensible “Holy Mystery.” It would mean accepting that one is loved ineffably and unconditionally by that same God, and it would mean responding to that Love by both *seeking and revealing* the immanent presence of God in self, others and the world. (Johnson) That is to say, it will be essential to have an experience of the infinite mystery that we call God, to come to know that one is loved *as one is* by God, and to learn to love oneself and others in that same way.<sup>3</sup>

I think what that message did for me, was help me to realize that it is only out of a real, intimate and on-going relationship with God that I can be faithful to God’s call to follow the Gospel imperative. That imperative is to do justice. This same imperative - to be compassionate - is found in other faith traditions as well. Vatican II reminded all who listened that justice is constitutive of the Gospel. The Gospel calls us to view all of life, and all relationships, in light of the Good News of Jesus Christ. His good news is about healing the sick, freeing the prisoner, visiting the imprisoned, and bringing love and compassion wherever it is needed. That is to say, the ‘good news’ is about the transformation of the world, and the society, in which we live.

Underlying this presentation is the theme of faith and a sustainable economy. For many the symbol of economy is the dollar sign. Our government measures the growth and health of the economy in production and consumption. Economists wrestle with figures, balances and projections, supplies and demands. That is neither my expertise, nor my interest at this moment. However, I do want to reflect on a broader understanding of economics and economy.

Theologian and author, Sallie McFague writes the following: “...at its base, economics is simple: it is about dividing up whatever is scarce among competing uses and users. It is, for instance, about divvying up a candy bar among three children, or about deciding how to spend an hour’s free time. ...

... Economics ... is present whenever and wherever *scarcity* exists. ...

...It is important to underscore that economics is not *primarily* about money; more fundamentally, it is about decisions concerning scarcity from the perspective of a number of

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<sup>3</sup> In QUEST for the LIVING GOD, chapter 2 *Gracious Mystery, Ever Greater, Ever Nearer*, Elizabeth Johnson discusses Rahner’s thinking about Holy Mystery.

values, *one* of which is money.”<sup>4</sup>

Among the other values, are the ones identified in the Canadian Index of Social Well-Being. Those indicators include social, economic and environmental factors. The values relate to “healthy populations, education, community vitality, democratic engagement, environment, use of time, leisure and culture.”<sup>5</sup> These values are vital to life. They speak to the broader concerns of the civic society. They speak to the matters of life that are of great importance to churches and faith communities, because it is in these contexts and realities, that transformation toward wholeness and wellbeing - fullness of life- happens. And, they present a much bigger picture of when and where there is scarcity in the land.

Yet, there is a still bigger economy that needs our attention. That is the planetary economy. This planet is the only one - historically and currently - on which human life, as we know it, exists. And we share the planet with all its other life systems. One planet -Earth- limited in both number and resources is being used by a multiplicity of creatures. Thus, when I say “planetary economy,” I mean the presence, or absence, of scarcity in the affairs of the planet. The planetary economy is affected by the stress put upon the earth by human activity and human exploitation, which have become one of the global forces on the earth - and often a destructive one at that. Think: climate change, oil spills, the devastation and ravages of war.

The planetary economy is quite different from the global economy. The impetus of the planetary economy is toward life. The global economy expresses itself in the global financial markets and institutions, the supply and demand chains of the world, the multinational corporations and the accumulation of wealth by a minority at the expense of both the life systems of the earth itself, and the lives of countless human beings. The impetus of the global economy is toward *so-called* “progress,” that often benefits a select few while destroying uncounted, sacred human and non-human lives. Yet, much good is being done by caring and ethical people in that economy.

The greater economy, to which faith invites us to attend, is the planetary economy, which, until now, has been sustainable. The global economy has grown ever more unsustainable. The question, then, of sustainability requires of us as human beings an ethical response, and the

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<sup>4</sup> McFague, Sallie *Life Abundant* p. 75

<sup>5</sup> Canadian Index of Well-Being [www.ciw.ca](http://www.ciw.ca)

necessary public venue and policies, to support that response. It also requires of us inclusiveness and a readiness to collaborate for the life of the planet and all its life systems. It will require sharing our own personal, political, social and economic visions; it will require finding and acting on common ground and common values. Thomas Berry calls it ‘reinventing the human.’<sup>6</sup>

He, Thomas Berry, in an a paper titled: “*Economics: Its Effects on the Life Systems of the World*,” says:

“Only now do we begin to consider that there is an economics of the human species as well as an economics of the earth as a functional community. We have just begun to realize that the primary objective of economic science, of the engineering profession, of technological invention, of industrial processing, of financial investment, and of corporate management, [and I would add, of governments and faith communities] must be the integration of human well-being within the context of the natural world. This is the primary purpose of economics. Only within the ever-renewing processes of the natural world is there any future for the human community.”<sup>7</sup>

I link this recognition of the need for more inclusive economics with another of Thomas Berry’s key understandings, “the universe is psychic-spiritual as well as physical-material from its beginning.”<sup>8</sup>

Churches and faith communities, historically attentive to the spiritual needs of people, therefore have an essential role in facilitating just and ethical responses to the continued development and well being of both the human species and the planet.

What does faith contribute to the development and maintenance of a sustainable, integrated economy in which the well being of humans and all other life systems of the earth is foremost? What does faith have to say in the development of a public ethical response and the creation of public policy for both civil and planetary survival?

Theologically, creation has been seen as the ‘garden’ at the service of human beings; the backdrop against which human life unfolded. Originally described as “good,” the rest of Creation was gradually considered to be of lesser value than humans. However, in

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<sup>6</sup> Thomas Berry and the New Cosmology ed. By Anne Lonergan and Caroline Richards; Essay by Berry *Economics: Its Effects on the Life Systems of the World* (p. 19)

<sup>7</sup> Ibid: p. 9

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Berry and the New Cosmology Chapter 10 Our Future on Earth: Where Do We Go From Here? P.104.

contemporary times, when science has expanded our understanding of the universe - both microscopically and macroscopically - many have come to appreciate even more deeply the intrinsic value of earth and the universe itself. We are confronted with the mysteries of the universe and are challenged to develop new theological understandings of creation and of who God is. We have begun to see the interdependence of creation. We have begun to see not only the vitality and riches, but also the limitations of the earth. We have begun to value not only humans, but also the earth community and the life systems of the earth.

In a post-modern world at a time when, culturally and societally, efforts are being made to de-construct the world envisioned and created by industrial and modern times, Christian faith is challenged. Both Thomas Berry and Sallie McFague would say: rightly so, since we theologially helped create the philosophy and life style that has facilitated an unmitigated assault on the earth in the name of progress and human development. We distanced both God and humans from the rest of creation. We lost the awareness that what comes from the Sacred is sacred. In our efforts to find out what makes the universe tick, we lost our sense of wonder at the dynamic, self-restoring, self-perpetuating life of the earth.<sup>9</sup>

As people of faith we believe that all creation is good; that life is intended by its Creator to be both good and abundant; that fullness of life is both promised and possible - and not only for a few. In these times, we are challenged to hold firm to this vision of life abundant for all creation. It is faith that enables us to acknowledge that, despite apparent scarcity there is enough for all, as long as we humans share equitably, ethically and compassionately. Faith also has the capacity to ground us in the awareness that the deepest human desires and aspirations for fullness of life are not the prerogative of a few. I believe that every faith tradition has among its core beliefs, the foundational belief that humans are relational beings in the image of our creator, and that the best of our nature is revealed in the respect, love and compassion we show to other human beings and to all life. Faith enables us to see the relationship between humans as part of a greater network of relationships, which includes relationships with God, with creation, and with the very life systems of the earth. Churches and faith communities have the capacity and the desire, to assist civic society to envision the best possible relationships: those of respect, honesty, compassion, forgiveness and love, in all aspects of society: social, political, economic and spiritual.

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<sup>9</sup> Berry, Thomas *Economics: Its Effect on the Life Systems of the World* p. p. 15-17

One of the gifts to society that arises out of the faith communities is the gift of compassion for the other that expresses itself in solidarity with the other. Yet solidarity is a challenge to us when it is the solidarity called for, by what Sallie McFague calls an *economy of enough*.<sup>10</sup> Why? Simply put: because an *economy of enough* says that there is enough for all if we are willing to share it. The privileged of this world, which includes us - must release from our possession what others need in order to survive. We must choose less, use less, and consume less. We must choose to destroy less so that all threatened life systems and species can survive. We have been told that if all peoples in the world were to live with the resource consumption of the privileged ones, it would take five or six worlds like the earth to provide enough. To continue to live as we do is unethical and immoral. In theological language, it is sinful. Who will speak that truth to our society if not the churches - knowing that the word we speak is to each other and ourselves, as well as to the rest of the society?

I work in a Poverty Reduction Working Group in North Bay. It is a collaborative effort of some social service agencies, the public health unit, church representatives, volunteer citizens and some people who are experiencing actual material poverty. As you know, systemic change does not come easily. What does seem to come consistently however, is a persistent sense of hope. Sometimes it comes with the articulation of our vision. Other times it comes with a new task accomplished. Other times I think it comes from a deep interior sense that what we are doing is living out the gospel in caring for others; and sometimes it comes from the very people in our midst who are struggling in situations of poverty. I am reminded.

When I worked in Guatemala, one of the things that struck me most powerfully was that people in their extreme poverty and deprivation smiled, laughed and lived with an incredible freedom of spirit. They countered poverty, sickness, deprivation, and injustice with a robust hope rising out of their indomitable human spirit. This hope is where the churches and faith communities need to, and can, connect in solidarity to bring about a more just society. Maria Chin speaks of *hope as an ethics of liberation*.<sup>11</sup>

We probably don't often think about hope as an ethical response. Our grounded hope is not

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<sup>9</sup> McFague, Sally *Life Abundant* pp 78-81

<sup>10</sup> McFague, Sallie p 14 She speaks of "a philosophy of 'enoughness,' which gets concrete in an economy of enough.

<sup>11</sup> Chin, Maria RSM, *Claiming the God-Held Wholeness of All Creation*. Presentation to General Chapter, Rome July 4, 2007 p. 2 Quote from Robert Raines

optimism. Our hope as faith leaders and faith communities has the power to establish solidarity with those who hope in circumstance that we may not have the courage to face. It has the power to elicit hope from others, and to help transform the responses of both civilians and elected governments. Maria Chin calls it “*outrageous hope - that remarkable ability to imagine life differently, to bring an alternative imagination to our understanding of the mystery of God’s spirit present and at work in our world.*”<sup>12</sup>

Maria Chin also speaks of “*an ethics of resistance.*”<sup>13</sup> She describes what Sallie McFague has called “*cruciform living.*”<sup>14</sup> Both image life as modelled by Jesus. Maria speaks of “*ordinary people ... stretched vertically by their deep desire for sustainable development and systemic change and pushed and pulled horizontally by their daily and immediate need for food, shelter, health and education - essentials of which they have so little.*”<sup>15</sup>

What would our 1<sup>st</sup> world society be like if we were able to live out of an “ethics of resistance” to excessiveness? What if we were to choose to resist the greed for possessions and for power? Faith communities, who believe in the transforming action of love through the action of God’s spirit and human co-operation with God, can offer much to assist us in living an ethics of hope and resistance.

I have spoken about a sustainable planet, which for me is essential because the human community cannot exist without the planet. One theologian and writer whom I very much admire is Elizabeth Ann Johnson. She speaks about sustaining the planet. In her work: *Passion for God, Passion for Earth*, she wrote: “On the one hand, we gaze in wonder at the world; on the other hand, we are wasting it.”<sup>16</sup>

She suggests “three responses to earth’s crisis: the sacramental, the ascetic and the prophetic.”<sup>17</sup> I think responses such as these can lead to a sustainable and just economy.

She says: “The sacramental response gazes at the world with eyes of love rather than with

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<sup>12</sup> Maria Chin, RSM, *Claiming the God-Held Wholeness of All Creation*, Presentation to General Chapter, Rome July 4, 2007 p.2

<sup>13</sup> *ibid* p. 2

<sup>14</sup> McFague, Sallie *Abundant Life* p. 22

<sup>15</sup> Maria Chin, RSM, *Claiming the God-Held Wholeness of All Creation*, Presentation to General Chapter, Rome July 4, 2007 p. 2

<sup>16</sup> Johnson CSJ, Elizabeth A. *Passion for God, Passion for Earth* in *Spiritual Questions for the Twenty-First Century: Essays in Honor of Joan D. Chittister* Ed by Mary Hembrow Snyder p. 121

<sup>17</sup> *ibid* p. 121

an arrogant, utilitarian stare, and sees there the handiwork of God.”<sup>18</sup> My comment is that faith communities can help to bring about the realization that the earth is the initial revelation of God, and a sign of God’s presence - what she calls “the original sacrament.”<sup>19</sup> And I think of Rahner’s words about being a mystic. We are invited not to be one who withdraws from the unease and disease of the world but one who sits with, and in the presence of, the God who resides at the very core of that world, seeing and responding to its beauty, its goodness and its brokenness. To be there is both a contemplative and an ethical response.

She says: “The ascetic response calls for intellectual humility in our assessment of the human place in the universe and practical discipline in our use of natural resources.”<sup>20</sup> The kind of ascetical approach she suggests would integrate humans into the web of life as one interdependent strand - albeit gifted with ever-expanding consciousness and the capacities to wonder, to choose, to listen and respond to God’s spirit, and to live ethically. It calls us to live with less.

And what about the prophetic response? “The prophetic response moves us to action on behalf of justice for the Earth,”<sup>21</sup> Johnson says. While she does not deny the need to respond to the human community, she says: “The need to care for the earth, to heal and redeem it, takes on the character of a moral imperative. One stringent criterion must now measure the morality of our actions: whether or not these contribute to a sustainable Earth community.”<sup>22</sup>

When we take planetary sustainability as our focus, we may find it easier to collaborate. We may discover that within our differing theological, ethical, moral and political stances we have the power respond contemplatively, ascetically and prophetically. Faith communities have long known that such responses are essential to the well being of the human community. We have a strength and a gift to offer civic society. We need to make sure that we have the psychic, social and physical space in which to do that. We can choose to act together to build not only a sustainable national economy, but also one that exists within a sustainable planetary economy.

Sallie McFague says: “The word ‘theology’ simply means ‘words about God.’”<sup>23</sup> I like

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<sup>18</sup> ibid p. 121

<sup>19</sup> ibid p. 122

<sup>20</sup> ibid p. 122

<sup>21</sup> ibid p 123

<sup>22</sup> ibid p123

<sup>23</sup> McFague, Sallie Life Abundant p. 39

that definition. What I have tried to do today is to say ‘some words about God,’ and our response to God whom we believe is in the contemporary world in which we find ourselves. I speak with a deep conviction that God is both present and active in this world. I believe very strongly that God is present and active in actual concrete ways through the mediation of human beings like ourselves who choose to live and act as God’s adopted sons and daughters. “It is God, for (God’s) own loving purpose, who puts both the will and the action into you.”<sup>24</sup>

I want to say that it is necessary for us to discern what is of God, and what is not. I think we need to identify some of the indicators of God’s presence and action. One may say one is acting under God’s inspiration but the indicators may not show that. A few of the indicators for me I would be: peace, joy, tolerance, respect and compassion for others, a readiness to listen and to engage openly and honestly in dialogue, and a willingness to act out of love.

Finally, we are gathered here because we desire that God’s will for fullness of life be accomplished in our world. We believe we have been given gifts, strengths and resources to speak to our society and be actively involved in its development and growth. We have heard the call to be a vital part of the transformation of our world into one that practices love, truth, justice and compassion for all of creation. May we walk in hope and trust in the God who lives in us, leads us, and acts with, in and through us!

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<sup>24</sup> Jerusalem Bible Philippians 2:13