Caritas

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EARTH CHARTER WORKSHOP

How to save the planet from us

Eyes widened, heads nodded and hands flew to take notes as Sister Paula Gonzalez presented a weekend workshop in Spokane in March on "Building the Kingdom: Praying the Earth Charter" to the sisters of Mother Joseph Province.

Among the topics were "The Crisis of Unsustainable Growth," "The Challenge of a Warming Planet," "Co-creating a Sustainable Future: Reducing our Ecological Footprint and our Carbon Footprint," "Hope through Alternatives," and "Toward a 21st Century Spirituality: The Vowed Life in an Ecological Age."

The Sister of Charity of Cincinnati's presentation was fast-paced, information laden and impassioned. Listeners could not fail to be moved by a 9-year-old's take on what this topic is all about:

I am the ill Earth.
If people trash me, I will die,
And so will they.

Using information from myriad sources, Sister Paula presented the challenge:

- Growth in the world economy in 2000 exceeded that of the entire 19th century.
- As the economy grows, its demands are outgrowing the planet's capacity.
- Water is the primary global crisis from 1950 to 2000, the world water demand tripled.

Sister Paula drove her point home by graphically representing the concept of the ecological footprint, "the land area needed to accommodate consumption levels and waste discharge of an economy." The following is the measure of the load the population of various nations imposes on nature, expressed in acres.

	foot-print	*current capacity*	*(deficit)*
World average	**7.1**	**5.3**	**(-1.8)**
USA	**31**	**14**	**(-17)**
Canada	**21**	**27**	**+6**
Mexico	**8**	**4**	**(-4)**
India	**2**	**2**	**0**

(For a real eye-opener, go online to http://www.redefiningprogress.org and take a quiz to find out your own ecological footprint. It is pretty sobering to learn that your lifestyle demands six or seven more planets to sustain it.)

The point Sister Paula effectively drove home is that we already have the blueprint for turning things around: The Earth Charter, a document written and endorsed by the people of many nations to foster social and economic justice. It seeks to eradicate poverty as an ethical, social and environmental imperative,

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How to save the planet from us...

and to ensure that economic activity and institutions at all levels promote human development in an equitable and sustainable manner.

As the preamble to the document states: "We must decide to live with a sense of universal responsibility, identifying ourselves with the whole earth community."

Sr. Paula Gonzalez, SC

So what can we do? Sister Paula said three immediate actions are a good beginning:

1 re-envision the human role in the sacred earth community

2 realize that each one can/must make a difference

3 commit to action toward one area of earth healing

Sr. Paula talks with participants

Echoing Sister Joan Chittister, a Benedictine sister who is a noted author and international lecturer, Sister Paula told the sisters that what the world needs most today is: a reckless lover, a voice for the poor, and a pursuer of truth. For women religious, Sister Paula suggested, "making a serious commitment to reducing the ecological footprint could be the most prophetic witness of the vow of poverty in our time."

SO, WHERE TO BEGIN...?

The sisters of Mother Joseph Province are becoming much more Earth aware in their actions. Some of the sisters are composting, gardening, drinking fair trade coffee or tea, recycling and using more public transportation. These activities are only a few examples of what is happening.

One possibility, pre-cycling, is not mentioned often. Pre-cycling means to examine an item before purchase. Is it needed? Can the old one be repaired? What type of packaging does it have? Can it be purchased pre-owned or in bulk?

Changing light bulbs from incandescent to compact fluorescent light (CFL) will save large amounts of energy. It is important to recycle the old ones into the hazardous waste due to mercury in the CFL.

... I see all of the concern for the Earth as calling me and all of us back to a simpler lifestyle.

A third action is to change to natural cleaning products for the home and office. The ever present chlorine bleach is considered hazardous. White vinegar is an excellent disinfectant for the average home, even in the bathroom. It simply needs to be left on a little while longer. For those who would rather purchase ready made cleaning products, Seventh Generation makes excellent all natural products, as do other corporations.

A general rule of thumb that I use is to look at the ingredients panel on the label of whatever we purchase. If it has a long list of chemicals, chances are it is not healthy for the human body. The simpler, the better.

In many respects, I see all of the concern for the Earth as calling me and all of us back to a simpler lifestyle.

– JoAnn Showalter, SP, Reclaiming the Earth Committee secretary

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Ministry profile:

Sister Dianne Crawford

Sr. Dianne Crawford (left) cares for feet while engaging seniors in conversation.

Massage and foot care are a family tradition that dates back generations, Sister Dianne Crawford says. She recalls her grandmother giving her a massage and a foot rub as a small child. And when her father died, she says, three men at the funeral told her he would massage away their aches and pains. Sister Dianne's own mother carried on the tradition, laying Dianne across her lap and rubbing her back or her ears.

"It is part of who we are. It's a way of caring and showing we love one another," Sister Dianne explains. Her earliest memory of doing it herself, as a child growing up on Vashon Island, dates back to before grade school. "My mom came home from a day of work at Boeing with aching feet. I wanted to do something to help, so I massaged them."

For nearly nine years, Sister Dianne has kept the family tradition alive in Yakima through her foot-care ministry. Three times a week she is a foot care nurse for 10 people a day, cutting toenails, taking down calluses and thick nails, talking about foot care and good hygiene and discussing home remedies. She brings a wagonload of supplies for visits to neighborhood centers and a more portable bag for home visits. Sister Dianne spends about 30 minutes with each person, soliciting information about them and their families as she massages their feet.

"I talk about who they are. We share about our journey in life, and about God. I am not only giving; they are giving to me. When you are touching someone's feet, they are more willing to share who they are and what's going on with them," she says. "It is a good vulnerability."

She was an LPN before she entered the Sisters of Providence in 1971. Three years later she became an RN, working in hospitals, nursing homes and clinics on the medical floor, the cardiac floor, the cancer floor and with the dying. She also worked at Providence ElderPlace as the head RN, giving all types of services. The podiatrist there had so much work that he did not want to continue. "I said I can do it," Sister Dianne recalls. "He said, 'Call me if you have a problem,' but I never did." Since then she has attended three seminars offered by podiatrists for RNs in Seattle.

Sr. Dianne transports tools for her foot-care ministry in Yakima.

She began her ministry with visits to shut-ins in St. Joseph's parish. Later, she moved to the Salvation Army and then Harmon Center under a city grant-funded program, and today she is at the Southeast Community Center. Word of mouth is her only form of advertisement. "People get my number and call me," she says.

Sister Dianne prays over the feet while she is massaging them. "God bless these feet and the person attached to them," is a common prayer, she says. Sometimes, she tells the person she is praying for them, and sometimes not. "If I tell them, they smile, thank me or sometimes laugh, but I have never had a negative comment."

"When I massage feet, I am praying God's love will be passed on to people I touch," she explains. It seems to work, because as she works on their feet, they talk about God and their lives and cares. "I see it as part of the Eucharistic celebration," she adds. "Christ not only had the Last Supper, but he did wash the feet. I am extending the Eucharistic celebration by going out to his people and serving them by doing their feet."