
Awakening to a New Consciousness

*Listening to the Cry of Earth
and the Cry of the Poor*

Mercy's Theological Reflection Process



Overview of Process: Beginning Conversations on Extractivism

[CLICK HERE to watch an introduction to the process](#)

In answering the challenges of our times, we begin by listening deeply to the experiences of those traumatized and most impacted by extractivism and to our own experiences. We reflect and learn from these experiences by placing ourselves in a new light. The process of conversion begins when we experience the unexpected in ourselves and in the vulnerability of the other.

These inner and outward encounters unsettle our own habitual ways of thinking and acting. We begin “to see what we have made invisible.” In effect, when we become “seared by an experience,” we are compelled to change and to address systemic change. We realize that the small steps of our own conversion keep us personally engaged in the larger corporate decisions. A prophetic corporate voice is not enough in a world where supply and demand shape the forces that entrap the vulnerable.

Among the vulnerable are the rural indigenous peoples struggling against corporate pollution of their waters, land and air; the economically impoverished urban people struggling to acquire daily food; and the refugees fleeing desperate situations often entrapped in border places. It cannot go unnoticed that most of these communities are Black, indigenous and other persons of color. Earth is among the most vulnerable, suffocating with explosive human consumption and multi-national greed.

God’s Call to a New Consciousness: Conversations on Extractivism

These conversations on extractivism call us to seek a more intense union with God through contemplative dialogue and through a cyclic process of conversion. In this *kairos* time, God draws us together to engage our prophetic voice. As we enter into dialogue with one another, we seek to learn more about extractivism and the systems that maintain it and its effects, and move toward conversion that leads to common action. Through our prophetic corporate action, we challenge ourselves: *How do we choose to stand together as a whole on the critical issue of extractivism?*

Our conversations take an *integral approach*, engaging us in three ways.

1. **deep listening** in which we hear personal and communal experiences that bring the effects of extractivism to life;
2. **deep reflection** on these experiences and on the root causes and effects of extractivism that is grounded in our theology and our social analysis; and
3. **deep transformation** as we discern how to act at this moment in time.

We will rely on intercultural and interdisciplinary lenses that shift power out of dominant Western worldviews and theologies. We will look to engage the whole body: mind, heart, flesh, hands and feet, understanding that knowledge is not located exclusively in the head, nor solely in facts and figures and scientific data. We are summoned to listen to the stories our whole body reveals to us. Even so, we cannot dismiss empirical data, as this information shows us what our bodies do not: the invisible poison in the crystal-clear river as it works its way down the mountain, the unseen toxins in the air that does not obscure our view of healthy trees, or the hidden contaminants in a deliciously crunchy apple.

We begin by *listening deeply* to *experience* (our lived reality and the lived reality from the perspective of peoples, communities and Earth impacted by extractive industries). **Deep listening is listening with the heart.** We move ourselves deeper by reflecting on these experiences. **Deep reflection is letting go of preconceived ideas and norms so we can become open to others' ways of interpreting reality, which compels us to deepen our understanding of the root causes and real effects of extractivism.** Together we will use the lens of *eco-feminist theology of liberation* rather than the dominant theological lens of the global North. This lens moves us out of the boundaries and dominations of Western analytical processes to include the wisdom, experiences and mediums (e.g., art, poetry, story and song) meaningful to those who live on the margins of society. The lens of an eco-feminist theology of liberation has risen from within the global south in its struggle against the interventions of the global north, and it will compel *us to see differently*.

By *listening and reflecting deeply*, we identify the ways in which we are called to respond. We engage God's desires for a deeper communion between ourselves and God, a deeper communion with our neighbors, especially persons made poor by extractive industries, and a deeper communion with Earth and all of creation. Through this process, we are continually called to a change, personally, communally and corporately, to be in solidarity with and responsive to the needs of the vulnerable and marginalized. Truly working to be an anti-racist institution requires a recentering of the stories and experiences that drive our decision-making, truly a *deeper transformation*.

This threefold process requires *deep listening*, *deep reflection* and *deep transformation*, and it compels us on both a personal and communal level to respond to God's call for a new consciousness. It is not a linear progression, but a circular movement, going deeper by listening and reflecting, and coming back to our experience, and going yet deeper again as the cycle progresses through our conversation together and we come into a place of transformation.

Resistance to Change and the Power of Habits

The resistance to change, the power of habits and our support of exploitative systems are among the greatest hurdles facing each of us as we seek to transform ourselves, our community and our world. In order to effect real change, we need to understand and engage change and transformation within ourselves while we are also seeking systemic change and transformation in the world. We cannot challenge extractivism while in the same breath supporting it by our daily habits and in our corporate decisions. Fear and the complexity of the issue can paralyze our responses unless we follow the lead of those most impacted and their creative responses that already are underway to address the problems of extractivism. In short, there is hope and a way forward.

As Mercy, we continually renew our commitment to our Critical Concerns: Earth, immigration, nonviolence, racism and women. We challenge ourselves on a daily basis to reflect on our habitual ways of thinking and acting, and at times, we choose to disrupt old habits and form new beneficial ones for the common good. We engage in this personal transformation when we pray, make choices about what we buy and how we live our daily lives and where we decide to collectively invest; we educate ourselves and others in addressing our Critical Concerns; we advocate with legislators and leaders; and we invest our resources to effect systemic change.

Deepening Our Commitment to Conversion of Lifestyle

Two major environmental crises of our times unfolded in 2019-2020. In 2019, the burning of the Amazon rainforest, rightly called the lungs of the planet, accelerated. Driven by economic interest, land was and continues to be cleared for cattle ranching and for mineral extraction. The first highway ever built deep into the Amazon has paved the way for massive destruction of old-growth forests and substantial intrusions into the lands of indigenous peoples. The horrors perpetrated on the indigenous communities led to Pope Francis' call for the Amazon Synod (October 6-27, 2019). Bishops gathered to listen to the cries of the people who lived and worked in the Amazon. The church found itself called to new paths of conversion.

[CLICK HERE to read the bishops' pastoral letter:
"The Amazon: New Paths For The Church And For An Integral Ecology \(2019\)."](#)

Beginning in March 2020, we faced the unprecedented crisis of a global pandemic. The world has been shuttered by a new coronavirus (COVID-19). Daily habits were disrupted, and we have all been compelled to form new behaviors. While we were forced to stay home, Earth was on a mild recuperation from our lack of activity. Reduced gas emissions worldwide resulted in cleaner air, bringing back views of our world once obscured in haze. But the behaviors we engage in today may not become new Earth-friendly habits once COVID subsides. And so, the warming of the planet will continue on its trajectory.

The density of human population and its need for food and energy will intensify as the destruction of the natural world increases. Humans and their communities will persist in overstepping boundaries and encroaching into the habitats of wildlife. As a result, we will see not only the destruction of natural lands and forests as we have seen in the Amazon, but also a continual threat and a rise in frequency of more deadly viruses that originate when humans and domesticated animals "encounter" wildlife. Viruses such as MERS and SARS, and probably now the infamous COVID-19, have been linked in some way to human encounters with bats. Today COVID-19 threatens black and indigenous communities with alarming rates of infections and deaths. Viruses will probably change our world even more in the years to come as climate change and human activity continue to disrupt ecosystems.

A third crisis, while not a new reality, challenges us. The Black Lives Matter movement has challenged longstanding systemic racism in the U.S., and particularly racism perpetrated on Black communities. Racial violence fueled first by the historic brutality of slavery was followed by Jim Crow laws and lynching mobs that enforced systemic racism and racial segregation. The Black Lives Matter movement makes visible the persistent forms of systemic racism still existing in our day, especially racism inherent of our judicial and police systems. Environmental racism and racism embedded in financial structures and the extractive development model is seen as Affordable housing and schools serving Black communities are often located in old chemical- and waste-dumping grounds. In an area dubbed Cancer Alley, Louisiana industries along the Mississippi River continue to decimate the health of Black communities. Underlying health conditions and lack of access to affordable healthcare surface as yet another effect of systemic racism. Black people have died from COVID in disproportionate numbers. Thousands have joined the Black Lives Matter movement to challenge these forms of structural, systemic and environmental racism.

As we struggle with the destruction of the Amazon and with COVID, and as we join in the challenge to address personal and systemic racism, we also face the unmitigated forces of extractive industries. Unrestrained extractivism takes many forms, and it affects the whole network of ecosystems, including our own. Extracting minerals and energy, or extracting human labor (monocrops), or extracting members of the community of life all severely disrupt and even eliminate ecosystems. They result in the poisoning of water, land and air and the displacement of whole communities.

The most vulnerable (Earth, laborers, the displaced, etc.) are deemed expendable, with the greatest damage done to those already marginalized by race, ethnicity and money. Extraction of minerals and energy are not replenishable. There is no cycle of life, no planting and replanting of the food cycle, there is only taking of Earth's limited resources. With extractivism, ecosystems will continue to be radically changed, even destroyed, speeding up the climate emergency and its effects.

As we struggle to cope with our climate emergency, COVID, racism, and unrestrained extractivism, we must engage with into the hard conversations and decisions and reframing of our understanding. It is very difficult to change values and habits and sustain new ones when we go at it alone and when we are listening predominantly to the loudest voice and extractive industries who continue to make the business case for extractives. It is important to share in the process by which we challenge and change, but to do so in a way that inspires us. It is change that inspires us that will keep us committed and engaged, while changing out of fear and anxiety will serve only to paralyze us.

We are in a new *kairos* moment. We are called to wake up or risk losing something indefinitely. This space of hope compels us forward so that we do not get stuck in a place of fear and anxiety. We call ourselves to remember that we have been here before and we can do it again. This time we go deeper in our conversions; this time we seek a deeper transformation. We begin by exploring the underlying values and inspirations that have already compelled us to change a habitual way of thinking and acting. We ask ourselves: What ways have we already changed and deepened our consciousness in favor of Earth's health? In what ways have our current actions led to deeper changes?

Call to a New Consciousness: The Journey of Transformation

As a community, we have continually engaged in deepening our commitment to conversion. *We long to live in right relationship with all peoples and with all of creation and this compels us to seek out a renewed way of seeing, a new consciousness.* In this time, we are part of a global system that perpetuates the destructive effects of extractive industries along with their devastating impact on people, communities and Earth. The core business and the extractive development model of fossil fuel companies and mining companies are inherently hazardous to people, communities and Earth. It has devastating impacts on water, land, air, biodiversity (80% of loss globally), on the very life force of Mother Earth. It is a **primary** cause of our climate crisis. Respect for our interdependence with all creation is ruptured by extractive industries.

Indigenous peoples, who have lived for thousands of years in the lands of present-day Latin America, are victims of extractivism. They have experienced death threats, assassinations of beloved leaders and family members, and the destruction and poisoning of their sacred land, air and water. Whole communities have been forced out of their homes and land. Black, brown and indigenous communities in the United States must choose between their own physical health or making sometimes economically impossible decisions to leave an area as fossil fuel companies make decisions with no regard for environmental impact.

The call to a new consciousness is a challenging one. It requires us to move out of our habitual ways of thinking and acting for many of us driven by Western thinking and economic models. It requires us to engage in new experiences that unsettle us and summon us to listen deeply to what stirs in us. And it calls us to critically examine the ideologies, prejudices and assumptions that inform our worldview.

Questions tug at our hearts: What makes it difficult for me to move out of my comfort zone? What keeps me there? What attracts me if I let go? What gives me joy in choosing differently? Whose stories do I not hear? What does a commitment to climate integrity ask of me at this time? It calls us to a more engaged solidarity especially with Black, indigenous and people of color, who are disproportionately impacted by extractives industries. It asks us to reclaim our interdependence and harmony with Earth and to understand deeply the devastating impact of extractive industries on the flourishing of the whole community of life.

The journey toward a new consciousness opens us in vulnerable ways so that we can hear, center and respond to the cries of the poor and of Earth. In this journey of little conversions, we will find ourselves changing our habitual ways of understanding, thinking and acting. Systemic change does not begin with some grand transformation; it begins with new understanding and these little conversions. While we move to claim our communal prophetic voice and prophetic actions, we remember that deeper transformation must be held and sustained by our solidarity with those most impacted by extractive industries, especially communities of color, and by an engaged and supportive community. This deep kind of transformation calls us to live together more conscientiously on an individual, communal and corporate level.

So how do we begin this journey toward a new consciousness? And how will we empower our new consciousness through acts of solidarity with Earth and her suffering peoples?