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Theresa Martin

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STUDENT VOICES

Holy Water

Reflections from a College Senior

By Theresa Martin

A woman in a long white robe kneels into the marble baptismal font and gasps as the priest pours the apparently cold water of purification over her head. Drenched and now beaming, she stands and the priest gestures toward her, announcing, “Our newest neophyte!” The congregation erupts in applause at this new member of the church. I look down at my Easter Vigil program and read, “Neophyte: from the Greek word meaning ‘new plant.’”

Catholicism is filled with earth-bound symbolism. We sprinkle holy water, burn incense, and become “new plants.” Our liturgies demand that we honor the sanctity of the land. However, there are moments when the truth of environmental degradation surfaces. In January, we read, horrified, about lead poisoning and unconcerned government officials in Flint, Michigan. Water, the symbol of purification and new life, had become a carrier of poison and a cause for fear. Particularly for many white, upper-middle class people like myself, the effects of toxic waste disposal and contaminated drinking water have been disengaged from our daily lives. But for many communities predominately of color, like Flint, the effects of environmental exploitation have been entering their own backyards and bodies for years. However, the crisis in Flint is neither an isolated case nor a new phenomenon; it is a manifestation of environmental racism that has been systematically instituted for years but only recently come to the attention of our nation.

Therefore we must ask, “In what ways are our personal and institutional choices furthering this system of exploitation?” Particularly as communities committed to seeking justice and as participants in a tradition that is rooted in

earth-bound symbolism, Jesuit universities must find ways to integrate climate justice into college life. Doing so, however, requires conscious, practical steps. First, we must create dialogue with students and faculty members about environmental injustice. As we sprinkle holy water at school liturgies, we must also give homilies about the systemic mistreatment of this sacred symbol. In predominantly white churches and schools, we must acknowledge that environmental degradation disproportionately affects communities of color and that many white people have rarely felt the acute impacts of environmental harm. Creating dialogue in liturgies, classes, and faculty meetings can help replace simplistic narratives with a deeper understanding of the climate injustice.

Second, we must make practical commitments both individually and institutionally. Some significant steps include decreasing meat consumption and air travel. Perhaps we can reclaim the tradition of abstaining from meat (including fish) on Fridays – not only as a form of fasting, but as an act of resistance to factory farming and a way of decreasing greenhouse gas emissions. Students can also urge their universities to stop serving beef at institution-sponsored events and to recruit local speakers, rather than ones that need to fly in from across the county or world. Climate justice requires both individual and systemic commitments.

Finally, we can spend a day turning compost or planting seeds – visit an urban farm or plant a school garden. Climate justice necessitates a radical shift in our understanding of relationships. It demands uprooting ideologies that tell us we are isolated from the

effects of our actions. Through forming relationships with the land we live on and with people who most feel the effects of environmental degradation, we can begin to understand firsthand why environmental justice matters.

Sitting in the darkness of my apartment on Olive Street, I imagine the Missouri limestone crags, prairie grasses, and old woodlands that once thrived where highways, department stores, and college campuses now stand. I think of acidifying oceans and contaminated groundwater – or of little water at all. My mind goes to Flint, the Gulf of Mexico, and California – to East St. Louis and the north side. A half-second later, I remember impending exams and senior capstone projects, post-grad decisions and goodbyes. My desire to live sustainably wrestles with the urgency of college commitments. Is it possible to integrate college life and climate justice? Choosing to engage with climate justice in a college setting requires deliberate lifestyle shifts. Injustices like the crisis in Flint can nudge us to open our eyes, but these stories are neither new nor isolated. Time and again, we have opportunities to choose how we will respond.

Theresa Martin, St. Louis University class of 2016, is a double major in theology and international studies with an environmental science minor.