

2011 Commencement Address Saint Joseph's College Rensselaer, Indiana

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Congratulations to the class of 2011. You should be proud of what you have achieved and what you have become.

I am honored to be here today. I am honored to be a witness to the continuance of this great institution and its effort to instill values and to present an academic vision that not only opens doors to the world through liberal arts but also promotes respect for the expression of other cultures and the need for [protagonism](#) as one is confronted or challenged by the rapid changing events of a developing world.

For the last 25 years I have worked as a missionary in Peru. For the past five years I have been working in La Oroya, a town located high up in the Andes Mountains. La Oroya is known internationally as being one of the ten most contaminated places in the world.

When I arrived there, I was immediately confronted by the harsh reality of the [smelting](#) plant and the large mining activity that exists in the province. The majority work either at the smelting plant or in the mines. The smelting plant is the main cause of the contamination but the mines also contribute to the destruction of the environment.

The companies in the province, mainly international companies, develop their activities in Peru basically with two goals, to invest and to see the fruit of their investments. This contributes to the economic growth of the country and gives the people work and a sustaining income. There are other aspects though that are often ignored or simply not taken into consideration. For example, the people's rights are often ignored. They continue to own their land but what lies below it, is often divided up and sold for mining. This goes on without their knowledge and does not give them any economic benefits. The companies are given the rights to the water which is then mixed with chemicals to break down the minerals. Sludge is then left behind to contaminate the land and to affect the people's health.

The people who live close to the mining activity or along side of the smelting plant have learned to live in constant contradiction. They cry out that the earth is being violated and nothing will be left for future generations. They recognize that there is contamination and that their health is affected. They have seen the destruction of their land and their water contaminated. It is accepted though as a necessary evil because it gives them work and allows them to send their child to the university or build a home for retirement.

The workers live in company housing; some of the companies allow them to live with their families but others do not. Before, the companies felt a social responsibility not only to the workers but also to their families. They supported the education of the children and were concerned for the health of the people. In the last ten years, all of that has changed. The global economy has created an atmosphere where the family is seen as necessary but not part of the economic world view.

Then there are those live on the margin of all economic development, those who are affected by the development but don't receive any benefit from it. The poor are the most affected by the destruction of the earth. They have fewer defenses to fight off the contamination and its affects. Because of poor diet and the lack of proper hygiene they are more prone to be affected by the contamination. For example, apart from the workers at the smelting plant, they have the highest levels of lead in their blood. The children are most affected. The World Health Association has set standards as to what is permissible and what is considered a health risk. Five milligrams of lead in the blood is considered serious. Most of the poor children in La Oroya have levels higher than 35 to 40 milligrams of lead in their blood. The children of the workers who live farther away from the plant and have more developed defenses are able to confront these levels whereas the children of the poor are not.

There are modern technologies that can be used to lessen the contamination. The companies can invest money and create strategies to diminish the risk to the people's health and the destruction of the environment. It is a very costly process and for that reason the companies are often unwilling to take action, even though they are required by law. But with the price of minerals today, the cost is minimal in comparison to what they receive from their overall investment. It is a fact that when they open a mine they invest large amounts of money to initiate production and that once there is production, their only interest is the money that they can make from that. There is very little interest in how the production might affect the people or destroy the environment and much less as to how to minimize that.

What can we do? In this modern day world we can not be against mining activity but we can insist that the companies be more socially responsible and that they take into consideration the common good. This demands open dialog, because they alone can not define what it means to be socially responsible and what is best for the people.

The companies prioritize the money that is involved and how much they will get for their investment. That is why they are often indifferent to the affects of mining and at times hostile when they are held accountable.

As a Missionary of the Precious Blood, I have come to see this reality through the eyes of our spirituality and learned to respond accordingly. Saint Paul, in his letter to Corinthians tells us that we are like earthenware jars holding within us a treasure which is the death and life of Jesus. He goes on to say ... **"We are in difficulties on all sides, but never cornered; we see no answer to our problems, but never despair; we have been persecuted, but never deserted; knocked down, but never killed;"** (2Corinthians 4; 7-10)

Through the death of Jesus, we renounce all that is evil in this world, including that which hopes to destroy it. In our work to maintain or care for our earth environment, we often find difficulties and often despair, but through the life of Jesus we maintain hope that things will change and the life of Jesus will conquer and transform the world. Jesus died on the cross, was buried in the earth and the earth became sacred again. Through his resurrection we have received the task to preserve the earth and its sacredness, defending it from total destruction.

The letter of Saint Paul to the Ephesians says the following: **“But now in Christ Jesus, you that used to be so far apart from us have been brought very close, by the blood of Christ. For he is the peace between us, and has made the two into one and broken down the barrier which used to keep them apart, actually destroying in his own person the hostility caused by the rules and decrees of the Law... In his own person he killed the hostility. Later he came to bring the good news of peace, peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near at hand”**. (Ephesians 2; 13, 14, 17). Thus the pouring out of Christ’s blood brings us together, forming a unity among us, to work for justice and peace. It also gives us a source of strength to break down all obstacles.

Coming together in unity is a long tedious process. We can not begin our work for justice and peace or develop strategies to care for the earth if we are only willing to think of ourselves, our rights and our future. We can not remain as individuals, fighting alone the injustices that surround us. We need to be community and as a community learn to listen to the world and those who live in it. Only then can we respond to its needs. Listening is a process of gathering up information and discerning what is the truth. But then the truth requires us to be formed by it like clay in the hands of the potter. God spoke to the prophet Jeremiah and said, **“Get up and make your way down to the potter’s house; there I shall let you hear what I have to say.”** So he went down to the potter’s house and saw the potter working at the wheel. When a vessel came out wrong, he would start afresh and work it into another vessel. Then God said to the prophet, **“...can not I do to you what this potter does? Yes, as the clay is in the potter’s hand, so you are in mine.”**(Jeremiah 18; 1-6) So the truth is God’s hands molding us and giving us shape. It is that which hopes to mold the whole world so that everything moves in harmony with each other and is guided by him. This truth is often rejected but God waits patiently to start afresh and return us to what he originally created.

After Jesus’ resurrection, he appeared in the world and breathed over it, giving it new life and the promise of peace. So we are not only to be formed by the truth but allow the life of the Resurrected Christ become our life, our breath and our presence in the world in order that justice and peace be achieved.

When I was a student here, I had posted on my door the words of Pope Paul the Sixth who said that in order to achieve peace one must work for justice. I am in agreement with that statement but since then I have learn from my experience in Peru that peace is more than a goal but the quality of live that we need to maintain among ourselves.

Peace is more than serenity. Those who rest in peace are dead. We who are living must not rest but see peace as a radically driving force that demands everyone to construct a world where there is harmony and a constant desire and effort to maintain it. Peace among ourselves and with our environment does not allow us to live divided, ignore what needs to be changed or do nothing when it depends on us.

At various times in La Oroya we have been called upon to live this spirituality. We have had many marches or protests in order to have our demands heard. At times it has been difficult to arrive at what those demands should be. The majority is willing to fight for their rights but not necessarily is willing to fight for the rights of others. Again it is to march in unity and with a willingness to work for the changes that are needed.

One day, as we were marching, we were confronted by the police. They told us that we could not continue our protest and asked us to disperse. We stopped, dialoged with them and showed them through prayer that we were non-violent. They lowered their guns and allowed us to continue on our way. A short time later we were again confronted in the same manner. We stopped and interacted with them as before. They too lowered their guns and allowed us to continue. At one moment a group of women approached, crying and expressing a sense of hopelessness. They wanted to return to their homes but the military had blocked the entrance to the old city. The bridge was closed. Arriving at the bridge we found the military and their tanks blocking the way. We stopped, dialoged with them and prayed. They moved their tanks and allowed us to enter into the city.

I share this experience as an example of one expression of our spirituality. First, as I have mention before, we need to be willing to listen, to unite and walk together in our work for justice. Peace is the source of power among us to have hope and to maintain it as we are confronted by obstacles. Peace is also an expression of non-violence. We need to realize that to fight evil with violence only produces more violence and in the end it is evil that is victorious. A march or a protest is somewhat symbolic. It is our work for justice and it ends when the truth tells us that we have achieved our goal, that justice is not only for a few but for all.

Another aspect of our spirituality is mediation. In times of crisis, when there are disputes over worker's rights or the rights of the people, there has to be the willingness to reconcile differences. To listen to one another and to overcome personal interests is the first step. It is a difficult one because everyone comes with their own agenda and at first there is little interest in what others want or need. A various times I was called upon to be mediator, which means to pull things together, to help other to see what others see and finally to help all to work for a common good. It is not the victory of one but rather the victory of all.

Our spirituality demands that we not only criticize or ask for changes but that we are part of a solution in which we are eager to dirty our hands especially to work for the benefit and the wellbeing of others. There is a special call though to be attentive to the needs of the poor, the most affected, and to see their struggle as a priority and as our own.

I would to go back to the idea of listening, not only to each other in order to respond to the injustices of our world and work together to overcome it but also to develop a capacity for listening to what the earth is telling us. We have to learn from her and allow her message to guide our decisions and our interrelationship if we hope to plan and sustain a future which will benefit all of mankind.

When I was in grad school in Chicago, studying theology, I worked at a Jewish synagogue, in an after school program for children. I once heard this story being told, a story in which the earth is able to communicate and manifest how it is related to us.

Once upon a time, two men and their families came to a rabbi arguing heatedly over a piece of land that overlapped on to both of their properties. They both began shouting and screaming at the rabbi and at each other: 'It's mine!' 'No, it's mine!' The rabbi waited a moment to let them yell. Eventually they realized he was waiting for them to stop, and so they did. The rabbi spoke to the first man, asking, 'What is your argument? Why do you say that the land belongs to you? Why should I rule in your favor?' The man pulled himself together and said, 'It has been in our family's possession for hundreds of years. We own it by right. It has been passed down to us from generation to generation. Rabbi, you yourself know what that means in the Jewish community!'

The rabbi nodded and then turned to the other man. 'And you,' he said, 'why do you say that I should rule in your favor? Why do you claim that the land is yours?' And the man pulled himself up to his full height and said, 'We have worked the land for years. They have let it lie fallow and not used it. They didn't know it might be theirs until we started harvesting the crops, and the land was found to be rich and fertile. It has always been contested between our families, but we are the only ones to appreciate it and farm it and tend to it, as it was commanded in the Torah. So, it is ours by right!'

The rabbi stood silently and stroked his beard. Then he knelt down on the ground, put his ear to the earth and listened. He stayed in that position for an uncomfortably long time, while the two men and their families became more and more impatient. 'What are you doing?' they demanded of him. He looked up at them and said, 'I have heard both your sides of the argument and now I am listening to the earth's version of the truth of the situation.' Finally, the old rabbi dragged himself back up on to his feet. He stood silent a moment and then solemnly gave his ruling, 'This is my decision: the land has told me that it does not belong to either of you, or to anyone. It is you who belong to the earth. Remember that. Now both of you go home and listen to the land you stand on, which feeds you and gives you shelter.'

So it is not so much that the earth belongs to us but that we belong to the earth.

We live in a new age. The world no longer can be seen as something entrusted to us and that we have the right to dominate and decide its future. We live in an age in

which we are to discover the importance of our environment and the need to take care of it and to live in harmony with it.

Over the last two centuries the invention of new technologies has allowed us to manipulate our environment to our own advantage. We now see the world distinct from ourselves and have lost a sense of divine communion. We perceive our natural environment as a vast realm of natural resources for exploitation and consumption.

Never before have we lived a period where there has been such a movement to alter the world.

Thomas Berry, a philosopher and author, in his book, "The Dream of the Earth", wrote,

"These transformations require the assistance of the entire planet, not merely the forces available to the human. Otherwise we mistake the order of magnitude in this challenge. It is not simply adaptation to a reduced supply of fuels or to some modification of our system of social or economic controls. Nor is it some slight change in our educational system. What is happening is something of a far greater magnitude. It is a radical change in our mode of consciousness. Our challenge is to create a new language, even a sense of what it is to be human. It is to transcend not only national limitations, but even our species isolation, to enter into the larger community of living species. This brings about a completely new sense of reality and of value."

We need to act in some unified way and establish a functional relationship to the earth.

We live in an ecological age. We are called to a deeper awareness of the presence of God in all that he has created. If we destroy a living species then we are silencing the voice of God that speaks to us and offers us guidance.

A remarkable woman, Terry Tempest Williams of Utah, who has lived through and chronicled her family's loss of life to cancer based on environmental destruction, writes passionately of the earth and our future together on it. She speaks of the earth, specifically where she lives, outside Salt Lake City, but of all creation in terms of family, of new creation and hope for our children and our children's children:

"Would you believe me when I tell you this is my family, kinship with the desert, the breadth of my relations coursing through a wider community, the shock of recognition with each scarlet gila, the smell of rain....is not the tissue of family always a movement between harmony and distance?"

Perhaps it is time to give birth to a new idea, many new ideas. Perhaps it is time to give birth to new institutions, to overhaul our religious, political, legal and educational systems that are no longer working for us. Perhaps it is time to adopt a much needed code of ethics, one that will exchange the sacred rights of humans for the rights of all beings on the planet.

We can begin to live differently.

We have choices before us, conscious choices, choices of conscience and consequence, not in the name of political correctness, but ecological responsibility and opportunity.

We give birth to creation.

- **To labor in the name of social change.**
- **To bear down and push against the constraints of our self-imposed structures.**
- **To sacrifice in the name of an ecological imperative.**
- **To be broken open to a new way of being.”**

(Terry Tempest Williams, excerpted from the essay “Labor” In Red (New York: Random House, 2001).