“THECOLOGY”

The Theology of Ecology
"Theology": Living Waters and the Global Right to Life  
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Greetings...[Slide 1]  
Intro: Series of questions... (raise your hand; keep it in the air)
  - How many of you here are professional theologians?
  - How many of you have an advanced degree in Theology?
  - ....................................................undergrad degree.............................?
  - How many of you are Religious Educators?
  - How many of you are Directors of Faith Formation?
  - How many of you are Parish Pastoral Associates?
  - How many of you are full time Social Justice Ministry?
  - How many of you are Youth Ministers?
  - How many of you teach in Catholic Schools...and I mean teach anything in Catholic Schools?
  - How many of you are hospital Chaplains?
  - How many of you volunteer in hospice situations?
  - How many of you are prison ministers?
  - How many of you are committed to the Society of St. Vincent DePaul or some similar outreach?
  - How many of you commit your time to the multiple ministries that make the liturgical life of your parish flow with grace?
  - How many of you have committed your time and resources to a cause that furthers the flourishing of humanity?
  - Anyone who hasn’t raised his/her hand?

Welcome, my brother-sister theologians: I call you that because doing theology is about making efficacious connections between the Christian Tradition and contemporary life. It’s about connecting our personal and global stories with the human story of God in Jesus in the evolving context of creation and the cosmos.
Living Waters
The “Theology of Ecology” (with a focus on Water) that I’ve been asked to talk about isn’t a separate category of theology; rather, it is drawing upon the riches of our Christian Tradition to illumine both the divine meaning of creation and the divine mandate to care for it. Here are some reasons for social justice and ecological activists to engage theology:

- Because theology construes all things in God, who is meaning-making Mystery.
- Because Jesus continues to be crucified in the victims of the world, including our earth.
- Because the victims of the world cry out for justice...and theology infuses work for justice with life-changing meaning even in failure.
- Because the suffering of the world is the suffering of God; it compels our hearts, our tears, our active, transforming presence. It makes us touch God.
- Because the revealing of God is happening all around us and in us and through us. We need to know how to tell that story. We need to know how to ground it in our own story.

Why? Here's a quote from a famous theologian:

“For the most part, people live by stories....Without stories we should lose our memories, fail to find our own place in the present and remain without hope or expectation for the future.”

So said Edward Schillebeeckx, a Dominican theologian. Despite the Franciscan frenzy, I am going to be sharing some stories shaped by my own Dominican tradition and experience, with the recognition that all of our stories today must be told and heard within the context of the Universe Story, and all of our stories are connected.

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and the Global Right to Life
One evening two months ago, in the tiny kitchen of an old convent in a medieval village in southwestern France, I was washing dishes. The Belgian Sister who had been away for the three days since my arrival tried to dissuade me. She is exceedingly gracious, but, as I was about to learn, also very excitable. ... As I splashed away, she finally exclaimed: *But Sister! The water is expensive!* Now she had my attention...I was mortified!

Just two days earlier, I had e-mailed Matt Cato the title and description of this talk. I thought I was so aware, but, from the standpoint of Sr. Arlette, clearly my water awareness was not sufficiently reflected in my water practice.
Several years ago, I spent a month in a convent in Mexico City. The sisters there wouldn’t let me ever wash the dishes. [Scarcity... tank on roof...no hay mas. Undrinkability unless boiled.]

Many years ago I spent a summer living with a family in an impoverished barrio in the Dominican Republic... [unpredictability of water and electricity].

Human relationship to water in each of these stories illuminates the cultural, social, and economic conditions shaping the quality and dignity of life in that particular context. Stated bluntly: The sisters in the French convent are better off than the sisters in the Mexican convent; the sisters in the Mexican convent are better off than the poor family in the barrio in the Dominican Republic; and they are all better off than the women and children in countless places in Africa, Asia, and Latin America who travel miles each day to eke out a ration of water inadequate to quench thirst and supply the most basic hygiene needs. In many instances, the water that costs so much labor is not only inadequate, but also the source of disease and death.
Yes – place is important, context is important, and all of these contexts are interrelated. As Pope Francis states repeatedly in *Laudato Si*, “everything is related.” And the nexus of relationship is the nexus of creation itself: Water.

*But, Sister! The water is expensive!*
I’d like to return now to that convent in France, in both its immediate and remote contexts. The convent is the home of the Sister Historians of the Order of Preachers, and they are located there in the ancient village of Fanjeaux because it is the 13th century birthplace of the Order of Preachers, the place where St. Dominic dwelt for ten years during the gradual emergence of the Order in response to the raging Cathar heresy. Of concern to us here is the nature of this heresy, and more importantly, the source of Dominic’s preaching against it.

**History/Heresy**

The Cathar or Albigensian heresy posits that there are two worlds – a world of good and a world of evil. In short: the spiritual world is good, the material world is evil. That is, the created world is evil, and our final salvation lies in a divine heaven beyond this world. This is an ancient form of the “unhealthy dualism” that Pope Francis explicitly critiques in *Laudato Si*. Some form of this heresy, which goes back to the first centuries of Christianity, has haunted the Church in every age, and is very much with us still. In Dominic’s time, it entailed a radical condemnation of creation, bodies, and matter that even included the sacraments. For the record, in the 13th century, the people attracted to the “new church” forming around this heresy were disillusioned Catholics who were woefully ignorant of the doctrinal depth of their own tradition.
Dominic wept over that ignorance: A man who radiated joy in the day, he prayed and wept at night for “poor sinners.” The source of his preaching against the sin of dualism was the doctrine of Creation: there is one world which God summoned into being and sustains in every moment of its existence; it is the world through which God is revealed. Creation: God’s first book. From the doctrine of Creation flow the doctrines of Incarnation and Cross: Already present in Creation and history, God chose out of love to become Incarnate in the particular humanity of Jesus, whose fidelity to the New Creation brought him to the Cross, through which came Resurrection and the first fruits of that New Creation. The center of our Christian faith still holds: The world matters, bodies matter, suffering bodies matter most, including the body of the earth. Everything is related and destined for communion; anything that hinders or fractures that relatedness is sin.

**Heresy Today**

Pope Francis addressed *Laudato Si* to every man and woman on the planet. I’m addressing you. Well, you’re the choir: *Through you* I hope to address the Church on the ground, the people and pastors who aren’t here and aren’t reading *Laudato Si.* Through *you,* I am most especially addressing those Catholics inclined to close themselves off from the challenge of this encyclical on the basis of an excessively privatized, localized faith. The sequestering of religious practice from the suffering of creation in a globalized world manifests the heresy of dualism in our age; it contributes to the fracturing of the world which God has destined for communion. To be at odds with creation is to be at odds with God, our neighbor, and our own deepest selves. And, indeed, even those of us who are whole-heartedly committed to the healing and oneness of creation can contribute to the fracturing. That has to do with another doctrine, the doctrine of grace and sin: We’re all of
us sinners; the good news is that we are more profoundly *graced*: Grace is the divine ground of our being and of all creation, and our solidarity in grace is greater and more powerful that our solidarity in sin.
Water and Integral Conversion

So that brings us back to us in here (for the sake of your mission out there), and to me...at the kitchen sink in Fanjeaux. It is not that the water saved by Sr. Arlette’s intervention is going to help the women foraging for water in India. It’s not even that I needed to be made aware of the cost of water. (Though the monthly bill is not the cost I am primarily concerned with here!) The point of the story is that integral conversion is a slow process, and when we talk about care for creation, we are talking about integral conversion...the daily ongoing response to our baptismal call, the call that came to us through living waters....

Through living waters we were baptized into the life of the One through whom all creation, all matter, came to be...the One who, in the course of time lay hold of that matter in the Incarnation...when Creation according to God’s intent became concentrated in Jesus of Nazareth. In other words, our proclamation in faith that “the Word became flesh” entails a broader reality than personal human flesh. In the course of 37.8 billion years since the “Big Bang,” or, more elegantly, “the great Flaring Forth,” all that has evolved into us as a human life-form...also and necessarily makes up the flesh of Jesus. This is what Karl Rahner meant when he said that “when God becomes flesh, the Logos takes hold of matter.” Matter that is not separate from, but evolves toward, spirit. The Word who is Spirit and Life takes hold of matter. And we know that life in the created cosmos depends upon water; all living beings are born of water.

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3 Rahner, Schillebeeckx respectively.
Science tells us that water came on the scene hundreds of millions of years after the Beginning: Water has its origin in stars that, upon dying, release oxygen atoms into space where they encounter pre-existing hydrogen. Water flowed into the universe, and with it came new powers of creativity, first by assisting the birth of new stars. Can't you hear in that early stage of creation the paschal paradigm? Life coming out of death in the solar system? Here on earth we know that life began in single celled organisms in the ocean... On land, “mammals developed internal, ocean wombs....” As scientific theologian Linda Gibler notes, “As water filled them and passed through their bodies, living beings became part of the hydrological cycle on which they depended for life.”

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As human beings, we know that our bodies consist of 70% water, and our blood is made mostly of water. *We are part of the hydrological cycle on which we depend for life.*

The fundamental role of water that science explicates is symbolically reinforced through the Biblical imagery upon which our Sacramental Tradition draws. In Genesis, God creates through the medium of water. Indeed, in the major Old Testament stories of Creation, the Great Flood, Exodus, and the Crossing of the Jordan, “water carries God’s intention and marks the threshold of new life.”

Life is always God’s intention, and life is mediated through water.

In the New Testament, Jesus relates to water in multiple ways; in John’s gospel, Jesus identifies himself with living water. But at the very beginning of Mark’s Gospel, Jesus chooses to be baptized in water. Scripture scholars have puzzled over why Jesus would be baptized. Some early Christian thinkers “believed that the world shifted when Jesus was baptized in the waters of the Jordan River. Jesus’ baptism was a moment of new creation, a moment that restored sanctifying power to water and consecrated all creation with divine presence.” Creation itself, alienated by the first sin, was restored, and human beings could enter this new creation through baptism. Sacramental theologian Killian McDonnell notes, however, that one ancient father of the church, Melito of Sardis, argues the other way around. “Because the cosmos is baptized, it is proper for Christ to be baptized. He speaks of the baptism of various elements: in the forging of metals they are dipped in water,... Egypt is renewed by the flooding of the Nile, earth itself is bathed in raindrops.”

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6 Gibler, 17.
7 Gibler, 21
Either way, in our earliest Christian tradition, all the cosmic elements, most fundamentally water, were considered sacred, not merely after being blessed for sacramental use, but *intrinsically* sacred. Christians were baptized in living, flowing water that was recognized as a holy, life generating force in itself. “Living Water” was not a metaphor, it was a sacramental reality because it was a created reality; in fact, together with God, it was the life-sustaining foundation of creation. As time went on...

- explain separation between Christians and water
- priest rather than God blessed water
- less water, longer prayers (but prayers richly invoked cosmic sacredness of water)

**Water, Women, and the Global Right to Life**

What about today? Since the Second Vatican Council, our liturgical life has been renewed through a return to the sources. For instance, thanks to the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults, our Easter Vigil again evokes the dramatic history of water in salvation, from the dawn of Creation to the Resurrection, and in many churches, baptism takes place through immersion in a flowing baptismal font. But, in the minds of most believers, are these sacred waters connected to the water in our rivers and in our sinks? Or are these separate realities? Does the power of water in salvation remind us that salvation begins in the restoration and healing of life on earth, life that is sustained by water? In other words, do most believing Catholics realize that water is a “right to life” issue?

Scientific theologian and ethicist Christiana Peppard claims that the sharpest contemporary refrain of the Church’s voice from the Vatican is that water is not just a
human rights issue; it is truly a “right to life issue.”9 “Magisterial documents since 2003 have explicitly referred to access to clear, fresh water as a fundamental right-to-life issue.”10 Pope John Paul II and Benedict XVI repeatedly took up the theme. “Culture of water is a term coined by the Pontifical Commission of Justice and Peace and Pope Benedict XVI in their messages to World Water Forums.”11

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9 Peppard, 61.
11 Peppard, 62
“A culture of water is a culture of life.” And the lives most affected by water scarcity are the lives of poor women and children. Because of the combination of the lack of fresh water and sanitation, 4,500 children die every day from preventable waterborne diseases; that is one child every 20 seconds. According to a recent U.N. estimate, “by 2025, 180 million people will be living in countries or regions with absolute water-scarcity, and two-thirds of the world population could be under stress conditions.”
As Pope Francis notes in *Laudato Si*, “...the deterioration of the environment and of society affects the most vulnerable people on the planet.” [48] He notes that there is little awareness of the problems that affect the excluded, “yet they are the majority of the planet’s population, billions of people.” [49] The irony is that we call them the marginalized. And among the marginalized, women and girls bear the greatest burden of suffering at *multiple* levels....You know this...
Yes, Sister Arlette, the water is expensive...and the cost is not the monthly bill. The cost is inscribed on the bodies of women and children. Nor is adjusting our personal domestic water use going to even impact the problem. Water crises (plural!) must be solved collectively through collaborative and political efforts toward sustainable solutions. Some of the most affluent or even merely comfortable people in our North American society actively impede such solutions because they might require an economic sacrifice. Others passively impede progress toward solutions because they do nothing, or they are, as Pope Francis said, unaware of the impact of environmental problems on the excluded majority of the world’s population. Many of these people worship in our Catholic parishes. The Church at the magisterial level has been speaking on behalf of the earth, its poor, and the life-and-death issue of water since long before Laudato Si. What about the Church on the ground?
What about the widespread tendency to privatize faith, keeping religion and worship separate from justice, politics, and the new cosmology?

My sister and brother theologians...eco-theologians: What we have here is a virulent heresy rampant among the Catholic population, and even some of the clergy—a heresy that needs correcting. The more that you are able to make the theological connections as you go about your work, the more effective you will be in winning converts to the cause of earth and its most vulnerable people. It is not just about the impact this will have on the world's healing. It is first and foremost about ongoing conversion and integral salvation for all of us. Pope Francis states, "We must not think that these efforts are not going to change the world. They benefit society, often unbeknown to us, for they call forth a goodness which, albeit unseen, inevitably tends to spread." [20]

In *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis issues an unequivocal call to ecological conversion, and then goes on to reflect upon the importance of developing a contemplative attitude and presence. He lifts up the cosmic significance of the sacraments, especially the Eucharist. In a statement both deeply traditional and infused with the vision of evolutionary cosmology, he states that “the universe unfolds in God, who fills it completely.” [233] Moreover, he proclaims that “sacraments are a privileged way in which nature is taken up in God.”

Francis’ encyclical is saturated with language, not merely of stewardship, but of relationship and interdependence. He speaks of the relatedness of everything, and of “mutual salvation.” The Sabbath, he says, “is meant to be a day which heals our relationship with God, with ourselves, with others, and with the world. Sunday is the day of the Resurrection, the ‘first day’ of the new creation, whose first fruits are the Lord’s risen humanity, the pledge of the final transfiguration of all created reality.”
Suppose every Catholic, particularly in the United States, experienced Eucharistic liturgy as a taste of the new creation, and felt sent forth to participate in the transfiguration of all created reality through union with Christ's paschal sacrifice? Suppose everyone being prepared for Baptism was schooled in the deep meaning of Living Water? That is, the mutually deepening scientific and sacred storied of water? Imagine the increase of what Brian Swimme has called “comprehensive compassion.” Such sacramental celebration, preaching, and teaching could contribute to a collective personal mysticism that would transform the world. Karl Rahner famously said, “The Christian of the future will be a mystic, or will not exist at all.” Never has that been more true than now; never has more been at stake.
The mystic knows that Creation is one; we are all related; our stories matter, the cosmic and sacramental stories of water matter, the stories of earth's most vulnerable and suffering people matter most, and all the stories are inextricably intertwined. We are not separate, we are one...and destined for communion. Correct the heresy of dualism wherever you find it. “Preach as though you had a thousand voices; it is silence that kills the world.” (Catherine of Siena, another Dominican, and a mystic.)
and

the Global Right to Life