

Environmental Justice and Human Rights

Reading the Signs of the Times

La Oroya, Peru

Nestled between barren, moonscape-like peaks of the Andes Mountains in Peru and spanning the Mantaro River, which supplies water to the Mantaro River Valley, the breadbasket of Peru, is the community of La Oroya. This mountainous town of 35,000 is enshrouded by clouds of contamination and particulate matter caused by the U.S.-owned Doe Run metallurgical complex, the main employer in town, which daily spews tons of lead and other heavy metal into the community, poisoning land, air, water, animals, vegetation, and humans. Particularly vulnerable are the elderly, pregnant women and thousands of children. An independent health study done by St. Louis University indicated that 97 percent of the children have blood lead levels dangerously higher than World Health Organization alert levels of 10 micrograms per deciliter, and many should be immediately hospitalized. Lead, arsenic, sulfur dioxide, cadmium and other contaminants cause decreased mental capacity; cancer; stomach, urinary, bladder, dental, and other problems; skin rashes; fatigue; miscarriages; and other health issues. No one escapes the effects of this chronic contamination, which coats roofs, streets, and fields and insidiously permeates houses, businesses, schools, churches, and other facilities. For the last two years Blacksmith Institute has listed La Oroya as one of the 10 most polluted places on Earth, the most polluted in the western hemisphere.

The contamination affects not only the immediate health and well-being of the community but also its ability to be self-sustaining as its capacity to grow food and raise livestock is greatly diminished. Communities downwind and downstream from La Oroya are also negatively affected.

For the last decade many groups have been working together as a coalition to address the problem of contamination and hold Doe Run Peru and its owner The Renco Group, Inc. (a privately held, non-publicly traded corporation based in New York City) accountable to its environmental agreement (PAMA) with the Peruvian government. The agreement has been renegotiated several times but Doe Run is still not compliant. The coalition's work also reveals that globalization and free trade agreements have that given corporations undue power over local communities and national governments. Education both locally and globally has brought world attention to the problem of contamination in La Oroya. A sense of solidarity and accompaniment by the global community has given people the courage to speak out despite threats from Doe Run. In April 2008 CNN reported on the situation in La Oroya as part of the "Planet in Peril" series. They asked, "Should families have to choose between health and a stable job?"

In this U.N. Decade of the Child and growing concern for health and wholeness of the Earth community, La Oroya is a symbol of the type of destruction that cannot be allowed to continue. It also provides an example of human solidarity and well-being that is possible when available technology is used in a way that will enhance and not harm Earth's processes and its residents.

View the video “La Oroya: Hot Metal and Air, Breathing Pollution and Promises” <http://vidego.multicastmedia.com/player.php?v=q6pm6fol>

“La Oroya: Hot Metal and Air, Breathing Pollution and Promises” tells the story of the people of La Oroya and their struggle with the contamination caused by the Doe Run metallurgical complex. It introduces us to the children of La Oroya and discusses the various approaches of the community, the Peruvian Government, and Doe Run, “Hot Metal and Air” touches on the complexities of Environmental Justice and its direct connection to Human Rights.

Discussion questions:

1. In “La Oroya: Hot Metal and Air, Breathing Pollution and Promises” the children of La Oroya experience debilitating symptoms of lead poisoning. What other issues raised in the video might be understood as “symptoms”? What might be understood as “diseases”?
2. What options do the people running Doe Run Peru have? What decisions are they making? How do you think Doe Run makes decisions and what might be their motivations?
3. Peru is a small country over 2,500 miles from the United States and Canada. Though geographically distant, in what ways might we be seen as connected to the people of La Oroya?

Confessing Our Faith

Matthew 25:14-31 (NRSV)

‘For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money.

After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, “Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.” His master said to him, “Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.” And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, “Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.” His master said to him, “Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.”

Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, “Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is

yours.” But his master replied, “You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

Bible Study Questions:

1. What words are used to describe each of the slaves? How does the master describe them, and how do they describe themselves?
2. What does this passage say about the kind of master God is?
3. What does this passage say about what it means to be a servant of God? What are we to do with our given talents? What might prevent us from doing so?

Reflection:

Though the parable Jesus tells involves three individual slaves, it is interesting to think of those talents given not only to individuals, but also communities. Indeed, just as God covenanted with the entire community of Israel, so Jesus Christ calls us as the community of the church. As Paul points out in 1 Corinthians 12, we each have individual talents and gifts from God that we bring to the body of Christ. It might also be said that God has given us many talents as a community.

This image of investing our talent seems particularly appropriate when we think of our modern environment and the ways in which we not only bury but spend our resources. Looking at the images of the bleached La Oroya valley, one cannot but wonder what the master would say were the talent of that Peruvian land returned so bereft of life.

In Genesis 1, God says to humankind, “See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the Earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the Earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the Earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food” (Genesis 1:29–30, NRSV). In this passage the very Earth and all of the life it produces are as talents for us—belonging to God and to us to care for lovingly.

While our global community shares the talent of this Earth, it might also be said that our particular communities have been given particular talents by God. Indeed, though the talents mentioned by Jesus in this parable become a metaphor for any number of gifts from God, we know of other instances where Jesus speaks to very particular talents. Perhaps seen as a contrast to this parable, the tale of the rich young ruler tells of a time Jesus specifically told a man to give away his money. In this context the words in our parable like “banker” or “interest” seem anachronistic. For Jesus does not tell this man to spend wisely, to carefully place his literal talents so that they come back two fold. He tells the man, “Go, sell what you own, and give the

money to the poor” (Mark 10:21, NRSV). Here God’s servant is asked to give; here giving and investing become almost synonymous.

While it is easy to condemn the servant who does not invest his talent, we also know too well the motivations that led him to bury his talents in the ground. While we are quick to identify the mistake of the rich young man, we can probably also identify why “he was shocked and went away grieving” (Mark 10:22, NRSV). Here Jesus clearly calls us to move beyond theology, beyond patience, beyond simple instructions, beyond safety. In the parable of the talents Jesus calls us to a faith that is scary and unpredictable: one that takes responsibility, takes action, and takes risks.

When we learn about the people of La Oroya in light of this parable, we cannot then bury these images of children suffering and families having to choose between the health of their children and living the only place they can find work. Taking the measures necessary to turn back the effects of plants like the Doe Run metallurgical complex in La Oroya is costly, even risky. But there are times when Jesus clearly calls us to re-evaluate what we believe to be our talents, calls us to re-examine how we establish the worth of other human beings, and calls us to re-imagine what it means to invest what we’ve been given by God.

Additional questions for reflection:

1. How do you see La Oroya in this parable? How do you see your own community?
2. What are the talents in your community that might be buried or ill-used? Why?
3. What do you imagine an abundant return on “investment” to look like? For La Oroya? For your own community?

Covenanting for Justice

How can we not act when giant corporations are poisoning people, especially knowing that we are using the products being produced? Yet stopping such practices happening around the world is a huge undertaking. For example, in the case of La Oroya, Doe Run is a private company, so shareholder activism is not an option unless you can apply pressure on the banks that lend them money. But many corporations are publicly traded and pressure can be applied through various types of advocacy. In all cases, governments can be pressured to enforce their environmental laws or create stronger laws. North American governments can be asked to regulate the overseas actions of corporations based in Canada or the United States.

Another way to affect widespread change is to gather information about the flow of money between corporations and host countries. Residents can then understand why concessions to companies are made and be able to make claim on funds that should benefit the country and populace, not disappear into private bank accounts. The anti-corruption work of Transparency International has helped in the drafting of two major international agreements that increase governments' ability to cooperate in reducing corruption across borders, and the United Nations and the World Bank highlight good governance and fighting corruption as key elements in reducing poverty.

Committed people around the globe are promoting an end to such corruption as well as transparency and accountability in the extractive industries. This movement has gained momentum over the past few years with an explosion in the number of civil society groups demanding company and government transparency in resource-rich developing countries.

We can add our individual and collective energies to this call for honest disclosure and justice by supporting the efforts of groups such as Transparency International and Publish What You Pay, which does effective work to reduce corruption. Consider joining Publish What You Pay and joining in global advocacy to demand accountability.

Transparency International—The coalition against corruption www.transparency.org

Publish What You Pay (PWYP) is a global civil society coalition that helps citizens of resource-rich developing countries hold their governments accountable for the management of revenues from the oil, gas and mining industries.

Publish What You Pay—International www.publishwhatyoupay.org

Publish What You Pay Canada www.pwyp.ca

Publish What You Pay—U.S.A. www.publishwhatyoupayusa.org

Join the PWYP coalition if you are a civil society group or non-governmental organization www.publishwhatyoupay.org/en/about/join-coalition

Open the Books action.openthebooks.org/t/2217/content.jsp?content_KEY=351

Video: Open the Books on Corruption - Publish What You Pay
www.youtube.com/watch?v=3BsQRCAAdKBg

Kairos: Canadian Ecumenical Justice Initiatives does significant work on corporate responsibility and transparency especially with Canadian companies involved in resource extraction. <http://www.kairoscanada.org/en/ecojustice/csr/>

The Halifax Initiative is a Canadian coalition of development, environment, faith-based, human rights and labour groups that has done important work on monitoring Canadian corporations involved in resource extraction and Canadian government support that does not take into account environmental and human rights concerns. www.halifaxinitiative.org/index.php/Issues_CNCA

Closing Litany

Excerpted from the Accra Confession: Covenanting for Justice in the Economy and the Earth

We believe that God is a God of justice. In a world of corruption, exploitation and greed, God is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor, the exploited, the wronged and the abused (Psalms 146:7–9). God calls for just relationships with all creation.

Therefore we reject any ideology or economic regime that puts profits before people, does not care for all creation, and privatizes those gifts of God meant for all. We reject any teaching that justifies those who support, or fail to resist, such an ideology in the name of the gospel.

We believe that God calls us to hear the cries of the poor and the groaning of creation and to follow the public mission of Jesus Christ, who came so that all may have life and have it in fullness (John 10:10). Jesus brings justice to the oppressed and gives bread to the hungry; he frees the prisoner and restores sight to the blind (Luke 4:18); he supports and protects the downtrodden, the stranger, the orphans and the widows.

Therefore we reject any church practice or teaching that excludes the poor and care for creation in its mission; giving comfort to those who come to "steal, kill and destroy" (John 10:10) rather than following the "Good Shepherd" who has come for life for all (John 10:11).

By confessing our faith together, we covenant in obedience to God's will as an act of faithfulness in mutual solidarity and in accountable relationships. This binds us together to work for justice in the economy and the Earth both in our common global context as well as our various regional and local settings.

Additional Resources

Getting to Know the Situation

- Manos Peru website: www.manosperu.org/index.php
- Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Involvement: www.pcusa.org/joininghands/peru.htm
- CNN video from "Planet in Peril"
www.cnn.com/video/#/video/health/2008/04/28/gupta.polluted.city.cnn?iref=videosearch
- CIA World Factbook on Peru:
www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/pe.html

For the La Oroya Campaign:

- Discussion Table: www.todosobrelaoroya.org
- Earthjustice-AINDA: www.aida-americas.org
- Oxfam America: www.oxfamamerica.org
- Muqui Network (“For responsible mining”): www.muqui.org
- The Canadian Network on Corporate Accountability (CNCA) – a coalition of organizations fighting for the regulation of Canadian corporations overseas www.halifaxinitiative.org/index.php
- Mining Watch is a pan-Canadian initiative supported by environmental, social justice, Aboriginal and labour organisations from across the country. It addresses the urgent need for a co-ordinated public interest response to the threats to public health, water and air quality, fish and wildlife habitat and community interests posed by irresponsible mineral policies and practices in Canada and around the world. www.miningwatch.ca/index.php

For Publish What You Pay—To bring transparency to extractive industries and help curb corruption:

- Open the Books on Corruption action.openthebooks.org/t/2217/content.jsp?content_KEY=351
- Video for Open the Books on Corruption www.youtube.com/watch?v=3BsQRCAdKBg
- Publish What You Pay—U.S.A. www.publishwhatyoupayusa.org
- Publish What You Pay—International www.publishwhatyoupay.org

For fair trade and free trade:

- “TLC Así No” Movement: www.gresp.org.pe
- PCUSA/PHP Joining Hands Program: www.pcusa.org/hunger
- PC(USA)/PHP “Fair trade”: www.pcusa.org/trade
- PC(USA)/PHP “Environmental Justice”: www.pcusa.org/environment
- Washington Office on Latin America - Free Trade: www.wola.org
- Oxfam—Free Trade: www.oxfamamerica.org
- International Fair Trade Association (IFAT): www.ifat.org