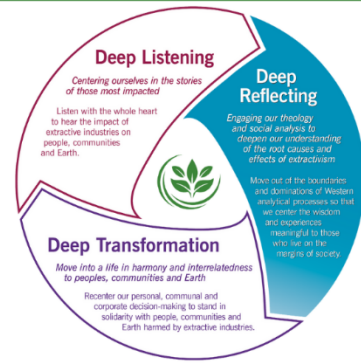


Awakening to a New Consciousness

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

Mercy's Theological Reflection Process



Extractivism in My Own Backyard

By Sister Terri Bednarz

When I first heard about extractivism and its impacts in Honduras, I was already familiar with the impacts of extractivism in my own backyard; that is, in Louisiana. I decided to learn more about environmental racism and the impact of the petrochemical plants in the Louisianan parishes of St. John the Baptist and St. James.

In late 2020, I took a drive along the Mississippi River to see these petrochemical plants firsthand and to visit the communities located in the shadow of their toxic pollutants. The whole experience was unsettling: a cemetery surrounded by a petrochemical plant, industrial pipes leading to the Mississippi River, and flares burning toxic waste spewing from the processes. These images evoked critical concern for the communities that endured the stench, the pollution of toxins in the air, land and water.

On my return to New Orleans, I thought about the water-processing plant near my home and wondered how this plant filtered out the toxins flowing down from these massive petrochemical plants. So I decided to test my drinking water. The results stunned me. The test read, "Uranium ... exceeds federal levels."

I called a plumber, who said he would call the water-treatment facility to ask about disturbances in the water system since the facility had been undergoing major renovation. The very next day, the water company had a contractor tearing up the street in front of my house for the length of the entire block. Whether the contractor had already long planned to replace the waterline, and the whole thing was a consequence or whether the replacement of the waterline was in response to a report of uranium, I will never know.

But I did research the possible sources of uranium in drinking water. Critical environmental studies pointed out that the major culprit was likely phosphate fertilizers (runoff from farms engaged in monocropping). So how, in this case, does monocropping relate to extractivism? Phosphate mining occurs in St. James Parish, Louisiana. The plant produces by-products of acidic and gypsum waste, both known for contaminating water. And so, what I have learned about extraction industries has come full circle for me. Extractivism impacts not only the communities upriver in the vicinity of production but also downriver in my own backyard and into my kitchen sink.