

International Earth Day – April 22nd, 2024 “Planet vs. Plastics”

Sister Rosane Steffenon (Brazil)

The first International Earth Day was initiated on April 22nd, 1970, in the United States, through an environmental forum organized by the American senator Gaylord Nelson; it was attended by 20 million people. In 2009, the UN named this date International Earth Day.

There are more than 190 countries that celebrate this date, committed to the protection and recovery of natural resources, in view of the sustainability of our planet Earth.

Natural resources are limited. Therefore, we need to take care and not exploit our planet. Earth Day is a special day to reflect on our coexistence in this common home, to raise awareness among people about the importance of protection and conservation of what we have and recovery of what has been degraded.

In this year the celebrations draw our attention to the pollution caused by plastic. This theme is an attempt to mobilize us towards a new understanding and daily attitudes in caring for our lives and all other forms of life existing in our common home.

Below there are some data to help us to reflect on the need to review our practices and join forces with people or organizations that intervene in society.¹

Humankind produces around 460 million tons of plastic per year. According to the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP), without urgent measures, this number will triple by 2060.

Plastic pollution is a major threat to the ecosystems, the climate and human well-being. Globally, 46% of plastic waste is landfilled, 22% is poorly managed and becomes litter, 17% is incinerated and 15% is collected for recycling, with less than 9% effectively recycled.

Marine plastic pollution has increased 10-fold since 1980, affecting at least 267 animal species, including 86% of sea turtles, 44% of seabirds and 43% of marine mammals. Air and soil pollution are also increasing.

According to an UNEP study, more than 14 million tons of plastic enter and damage aquatic ecosystems annually. Furthermore, greenhouse gas emissions associated with plastics are expected to represent 15% of total permitted emissions by 2050, if humankind limits global warming to 1.5°C.

In agriculture, the alarming growth of the use of plastic contaminates the soil, can threaten food security and impact human health.

In this context, ecologists, scientists, theologians, and social movements demonstrate in defense of our planet. In addition, Pope Francis asked us in his Encyclical *Laudato Si'* to reflect on Integral Ecology because everything is interconnected; it is necessary to consider the human, social, economic and environmental dimensions. *“Ecology studies the relationship between living organisms and the environment in which*

¹ <https://umsoplaneta.globo.com/sociedade/noticia/2023/02/12/tratado-global-inedito-contra-poluicao-plastica-pode-ficar-pronto-ate-2024.ghtml>
<https://www.terra.com.br/byte/onu-afirma-ser-possivel-cortar-poluicao-plastica-em-80-ate-2040,810ccd8a57ce70ba97432532736a750d3bl5r9ob.html>

they develop. This necessarily entails reflection and debate about the conditions required for the life and survival of society, and the honesty needed to question certain models of development, production and consumption". (138)²

There are also good actions taking place in the midst of this reality, in the daily commitment to care for the planet, at a personal level (changing habits/customs); at the community level, like the several local organizations that enable us to fight for a healthy environment; in religious, educational or political circles; or at global level, like the ONG Greenpeace, created in 1971, in Canada.

Some concrete initiatives on how we can take care of the planet, focused on avoiding plastic pollution:

- Avoid the use of unnecessary plastics, such as excessive packaging;
- Reuse plastic, for example: recyclable bottles;
- Eliminate the use of disposables: cups, plates, cutlery...
- Choose safe products that come from ethical processes and are committed to sustainability;
- Develop educational processes in our schools and in social and religious circles;
- Carry out ecological and environmental protection practices, such as collecting plastic, cleaning the banks of rivers, squares, beaches, public spaces, etc.;
- Encourage artistic works made with recycled material;
- Raise awareness through cultural entertainment such as theater, music, poetry...
- Influence public policies: for instance, waste recycling, protection of green areas, rivers, recovery of degraded areas.

As Sisters of Saint Joseph, we are committed to life, according to our Constitution:

"We are called to contribute here and now to the building of a world of justice, love and peace and to live an ethical style of life in which every choice we make is grounded in ethical awareness of its impact on society and the planet".³

² <https://www.vatican.va/>

³ Constitution of the Sisters of St Joseph of Chambéry, p. 6.