Introduction: The Environment: Issues in Justice, Conflict and Peacebuilding

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In this issue of the Journal of Social Encounters (JSE), we have an engaging collection of essays on the increasingly important topic of environmental justice, conflict, and peacebuilding. In addition to this collection, we have essays on other important and timely peace and justice studies topics. The essays are divided into three categories, which are entitled “Featured Essays,” “Essays,” and “Additional Essays.”

1. The “Featured Essays” are proceedings from the College of St. Benedict and St. John University's (CSB+SJU) 34th Annual Peace Studies Conference on September 18, 2023, titled "The Environment: Issues in Justice, Conflict and Peacebuilding: A Conference in Honor of the Late Fr. Rene McGraw." We were honored to have opening remarks by Dr. Brian Bruess, the president of CSU+SJU; an excellent overview of Environmental Peacebuilding by Dr. Ken Conca, an award-winning pioneer in the field; a discussion of Benedictinism and the Environment by Fr. John Klassen, OSB, the Abbot of St. John's Abbey from 2000 through January 2024; and an exploration of Islam and the environment by Dr. Jon Armajani, an accomplished scholar of Islam and a Coordinating Editor of the JSE. This conference was co-sponsored by the CSB+SJU Department of Peace Studies, the CSB+SJU Department of Environmental Studies, CSB+SJU’s Welcome Fest, and the Jay Phillips Center for Interfaith Learning at Saint John’s University which serves the CSB+SJU community.

2. The "Essays" explore various dimensions of environmental justice, conflict and, peacebuilding, and were not presented at the conference; and

3. The “Additional Essays” address other important topics related to peace and justice studies.

I also would like to call attention to our extensive Book Reviews section, which includes reviews of four new and interesting books on the environment and a number of other books on peace and justice studies topics. Readers should note that the JSE makes a special effort to have an extensive section of reviews of select books because we see these books, and the reviews of them, as important contributions of peace and justice studies scholarship from around the world.

I would like to say a few words about Fr. Rene McGraw, OSB, a beloved monk, professor and pioneer in Peace and Conflict Studies at CSB+SJU.

Fr. Rene McGraw, creator and co-founder of the CSB+SJU Peace and Conflict Studies program in 1987, which later became CSB+SJU’s Peace Studies Department, died on November 20, 2022. A Philosophy professor with a PhD from the University of Paris, he taught courses on Philosophies of Violence and Nonviolence, Aesthetics of Violence and Nonviolence, and other social justice topics. As an example of his commitment to scholarship, he spent a sabbatical with the prominent scholar of nonviolence, Dr. Gene Sharp, at the Program for Non-Violent Sanctions at Harvard University.
Fr. Rene was loved and admired by many far and wide, from different cultural backgrounds and religions. Journal readers may find it interesting to know that among those who loved and admired Fr. Rene is Mr. January Makamba, Tanzania's Minister for Foreign Affairs and East African Cooperation, and quite possibly a future president of Tanzania. January attended CSB+SJU, graduating with a BA in Peace and Conflict Studies in 2004. Those of us who knew January were impressed with his deep appreciation for Fr. Rene, who was a very demanding professor of Philosophy and Peace Studies. In an autobiographical piece, January noted that "my mentor was Father Rene McGraw who got me to ‘get’ Emmanuel Levinas’ ‘Totality and Infinity: Essays on Exteriority’. And since then, I have become a better person (I believe)” (Makamba, 2010). There are many such stories about Fr. Rene from his former students, as well as stories by his colleagues of deep affection and appreciation for Fr. Rene's brilliant intellect, collegiality, kindness and good humor. Fr. Rene's friendship was certainly a blessing for me personally, for which I am very grateful. We published two pieces by Fr. Rene in the JSE: a book review of Violence and Nonviolence: Conceptual Excursions into Phantom Opposites, in the March 2020 issue, and the essay entitled Benedictinism, Non-Violence, and the Rule, in the March 2021 issue. When he died, Fr. Rene was working on a review of a book for the JSE on Levinas and nonviolence, a topic of much significance to him. Fr. Rene was deeply committed to environmental justice and peacebuilding. It was only fitting that we dedicated this conference to Fr. Rene, his life and work, as well as his commitment to environmental justice and peacebuilding, and the blessing that he was to all of us who knew him.

References