

## **Abstract**

### **The Solar Nun: The Prophetic Action and Thought of Sr. Paula Gonzalez, S.C.**

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Sr. Paula Gonzalez, S.C. was a prophetic environmental activist and thinker who spent her life in the pursuit of environmental justice. Known as “The Solar Nun” by those around Mount St. Joseph University, Sr. Paula spent over forty-five years advocating, organizing, designing, and speaking about renewable energy, living a life committed to healing the earth and creating a sustainable future. Her accomplishments are many, including being an active participant in the United Nations Earth Summit in 1992 held in Rio de Janeiro, being a founding member of the multi-religious renewable energy advocacy group Ohio Interfaith Power and Light as well as many of its offshoot programs. She gave over 1800 speeches and presentations on eco-spirituality and sustainable living, and lobbied the Vatican to allow the Sisters of Charity to practice green burials. In 1982, she began having yard sales to raise money and gather supplies for converting a 1500 square foot chicken coop on the Sisters of Charity motherhouse grounds into a super-insulated passive solar home that came to be known as La Casa del Sol, where she lived for the next twenty years. Ten years later, she began raising funds and gathering supplies to build a new structure and organization known as EarthConnection. Still

active and standing today, EarthConnection's mission states: "Aware of the interconnectedness of all of Creation, we seek to integrate spirituality and sustainability through programs in sustainable agriculture, alternative energies, ecojustice, and eco-spirituality."

Coming out of a larger research project on Sr. Paula, the purpose of the proposed paper is to highlight the ways Sr. Paula took lessons from the material world to develop theological and philosophical concepts to animate her activism and life. The paper will thus be both biographical and theological, using her life and praxis as examples of her theological understanding of environmental justice.

A committed Catholic Sister, Sr. Paula held a Ph.D. in biology and used her intimate knowledge of the earth's complex systems to understand what it meant to practice a Christianity committed to environmental justice. Her brand of eco-spirituality and activism is thus inseparable from her understanding of the material realities of the earth. As she wrote: "In nature, everything is connected to everything else. Thus, interdependence is the rule. Ecologically speaking, community is the fundamental pattern of all ecosystems—deserts, mountains, oceans, forests, rivers." Drawing on the work of the Geo-Theologian Thomas Berry and inspired by (and indeed a part of) eco-feminist liberation theology, Sr. Paula mined the Catholic intellectual tradition for insights that could connect human beings to what she felt was an undeniable empirical fact of the natural world—the rule of interdependence. An early proponent of the Gaia Hypothesis, Sr. Paula sought to "change the model" from a hierarchic and anthropocentric view of creation as a singular past event, to a circular view of "creation as a process" that honors the natural cycle of death and re-birth and the equal interdependence of all creatures. What intrigues me about Sr. Paula is the way in which her method itself seeks

to subvert and change the model of theological inquiry: the Catholic tradition does not dictate the human place or practices toward the natural world; it is the natural world that dictates the human place and Christian practice. “Where might we learn a new model that would ensure true freedom for all members of the earth community? By turning to nature and seeing ourselves as part of it. Here we find a deeper understanding of what the divine architect is calling us to become.”