



The Message July 31th 2022

The Rev. Michael Burke
St. Mary's Episcopal Church

[Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14; 2:18-23](#)

[Psalm 49:1-11](#)

[Colossians 3:1-11](#)

[Luke 12:13-21](#)

You are Blessed That You Might Be a Blessing

Good morning. I bring you a question this morning. What is the first thing in your daily routine? Many of us have morning routines, things we do each day in a certain order as we arise out of bed. What is yours? What is the first thing you think of or say out loud in the morning?

They say confession is good for the soul. So I will begin. The first thing I often do, is a very bad habit. I roll over when I awake, and I look at my phone. I scan to see if any of the cameras at St Mary's recorded any unusual activity – from midnight to 5am the cameras are set to send me notifications of any activity in or around the buildings during the night. Then I check the weather and I look to see how the stock market is doing. Sometimes I comment out loud on it.

So... I guess there you have it. I haven't been awake ten minutes, and I'm already thinking about building safety, rain, and money.

Are these really my values? That's a pretty disturbing question to ask, really...

Are *your* values reflected in the first things that *you* do in the morning?

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Lets look at the Holy Scriptures appointed for today. The first reading is from the Book of Ecclesiastes, written somewhere between 200 and 500 years before the death and resurrection of Jesus. It is ascribed to Koholeth, described as a descendant of King David, called "The Teacher" in the passage. It is a book written by a man who had tried everything under the sun and found it all to be vanity, not in the nihilistic sense of being completely meaningless, but in the sense that all that we do or leave behind is ephemeral, like breath itself ([Ecclesiastes 1:2](#)).

Although written more than 2000 years ago, the words could have been someone's social media post from last week:

"I saw all the deeds that are done under the sun; and see, all is vanity and a chasing after wind.

I hated all my toil in which I had toiled under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to those who come after me -- and who knows whether they will be wise or foolish? (Ecclesiastes 1)"

At the end of a long life, The Teacher looks back to see everything that is done, all the fruits of his life and labor, and wonders if any of it really matters all that much.

He sums up the situation of many, even today, when he cries out: "What do mortals get from all the toil and strain with which they toil under the sun? For all their days are full of pain, and their work is a vexation; *even at night their minds do not rest.* This also is vanity." (emphasis mine)

Although at times The Teacher veers into cynicism and flirts with despair, the full Book of Ecclesiastes is the story of a person who sought happiness everywhere but in God and came to the conclusion that God is ultimately all that matters."¹

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In the parable Jesus tells in the Gospel for today, a wealthy landowner/farmer has been blessed in many ways. His enterprise has been successful through the years, so much so that the current harvest exceeds his expectations. So he decides to tear down his existing barns and build bigger ones.

Contemporary biblical scholars² have made much of the effects of this decision upon the man's community, told in the parable in a single brushstroke with an economy of words. They unpack the situation a bit, drawing attention to the interdependence of food security in ancient Palestine and the effect that hoarding and withholding a harvest of crops would have upon food prices and the poor. The wealthy man's failing here is not his wealth *per se*, it is that he thinks of himself and his own needs *first*, even when he has much more than he needs for his daily bread.

¹ <https://www.gotquestions.org/Qoheleth-in-Ecclesiastes.html>

² See Palestinian pastor and scholar Niveen Sarras <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-18-3/commentary-on-luke-1213-21-5>

In biblical theology,³ a person or family is blessed, not as an end in itself, or even primarily for the benefit of the one who is blessed, *but that we are blessed by God for a specific purpose – that we, in turn, might be a blessing to others.*

Elizabeth Johnson, a New Testament scholar writes: “The rich farmer is a fool not because he is wealthy or because he saves for the future, but because he appears to live only for himself, and because he believes that he can secure his life with his abundant possessions.

When the rich man talks in this parable, he talks only to himself, and the only person he refers to is himself: “What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?” “I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry’” (Luke 12:17-19).”⁴

That road, says the ancient Teacher of the Book of Ecclesiastes, leads only one place in the end: a place of vanity, when all things vanish as does the breath on a cold day. Visible for a moment in its own time, then gone without a trace.

Beyond the enjoyment each day of simple, basic pleasures, The Teacher has few answers. In biblical studies, it has always been a bit unclear if we are to take The Teacher’s musings at face value or if they hold for us a deeper warning, a road sign, in you will, on the path to a life devoid of meaning.

But The Teacher’s view of life was that of an *unchanging world*. This is not surprising, for in the world of the ancient near east, life was often unchanged for the vast majority of people for thousands of years. **Today we live in a world of *constant flux and change*.** Change is nothing new for us, *it is only the pace of change that is unprecedented.*

I could go in any of a hundred directions right now... But to give you just *a couple of examples of rapid change*, drawn from just ecological studies, scientists report that “ the current extinction rate of amphibians could be 211 times greater than the background extinction rate and the estimate goes up to 25,000–45,000 times if endangered species are also included in the computation.”⁵

Just two weeks ago, the Monarch butterfly, once a prominent symbol of St. Mary’s through the 70s, 80s, and 90s, was placed on The Red List of now-endangered species.⁶ Now, maybe butterflies and

³ See, in particular, the program of The Episcopal Church, “Blessed to be a Blessing.”

<https://www.episcopalnewservice.org/pressreleases/blessed-to-be-a-blessing-2/>

⁴ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revision-common-lectionary/ordinary-18-3/commentary-on-luke-1213-21-4>

⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Decline_in_amphibian_populations; Sources: McCallum, M. L. (2007). “Amphibian Decline or Extinction? Current Declines Dwarf Background Extinction Rate” (PDF). *Journal of Herpetology*. **41** (3): 483–491. doi:10.1670/0022-1511(2007)41[483:ADOECD]2.0.CO;2. S2CID 30162903.

⁶ <https://www.iucn.org/press-release/202207/migratory-monarch-butterfly-now-endangered-iucn-red-list>

salamanders might not be your thing, but a coal miner doesn't have to be a bird lover to be on alert when the proverbial canary dies in the coal mine. We need to pay attention.



The August 2021 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Report,⁷ for example, documents how it took the first full 150 years of the industrial revolution to contribute to a human-caused 1.1 degree Celsius increase in mean annual global temperature, but that amount of temperature increase takes less than ten years today at present rates.

The signs are everywhere, should you choose to look, sounding a warning from the news stories every week about crop failures, civil unrest, wildfires, and extreme weather events.

Change is upon us, and it is getting faster-paced every year. Perhaps this question, “what are the things that last?” is more important than ever.

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In the Book of Colossians, our second reading for today, there is a bit of a translation issue. Throughout the passage, the writer is using a spatial metaphor “things above and things below” to talk about the distinction of things that *of Christ* and things that are not *of Christ*. The author is working (as a rhetorical device) with this image of Christ seated “above” at the right hand of God and us “below.” In our common language today, it is a problematic metaphor, because we can mistakenly draw the exact *wrong conclusion*, that things here on earth do not matter and that material existence does not matter.

Lutheran biblical scholar Lois Malcolm writes: “Thus, when this passage urges you to “seek” (*zeteo*) and to “set your minds” (*phroneo*) on things “above,” it is urging you to further heighten your attention on [Jesus, the Risen Christ]. Amidst whatever is happening to you [“on earth” - my interpolation], become aware of how [Christ], as the Wisdom of God, not only holds all things together, but also is the one

⁷<https://www.ipcc.ch/2021/08/#:~:text=The%20report%20shows%20that%20emissions,1.5%C2%B0C%20of%20warming.>

through whom God reconciles all things and raises them to new life...”⁸

“...on earth as it is in heaven”, in the words of the Lord’s Prayer.

And it is precisely through this *Spirit of the Risen Christ, alive and active in us, around us, and amongst us*, that God’s work of healing and reconciling all Creation continues.

What we do matters, if it is the work of God *in us and through us* – healing the wounds of Creation, rewaving the broken threads of bitterness and brokenness among the downhearted, calling those who are proud of their own accomplishments to *serve first the common good*, building a just world where everyone has access to the basic needed for survival and well-being, lifting up the lowly and even casting down the arrogant in their conceits, that they too might find meaning and things of enduring value.

Seek God in all things and through all things, setting your mind on Christ. This, in the imagery of the Gospel, is the storing up of treasures that last, richness toward God in all Creation.

This alone is the Wisdom of the Psalmist, the direction sought by The Teacher of old, and the light of the Holy Gospel of Jesus.

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So... What is the first thing you think of or say out loud in the morning?

In the old monastic tradition, the monks would be silent upon rising from their beds in the morning. Their first thoughts, and their first spoken words would be the opening antiphon of morning prayer: “Open my lips O God, that my mouth might proclaim your praise.”

Lying upon my bed each and every morning, I could learn something from that.

I could learn something from that indeed.

(Be well. Show compassion. **Know That You are Blessed That You Might Be a Blessing.**

- Keep Coming Back. Amen.)

⁸ “Recall that as the “firstborn of creation,” the Messiah has not only created all things — in heaven and on earth — but also holds them together as the ubiquitous and personal presence of divine Wisdom within all of creation (Colossians 1:15-17; see Proverbs 8; Wisdom 7; Sirach 24). Further, as the “firstborn from the dead,” this Messiah is now the head of the body — the church — and as its beginning has a first place in everything (Colossians 1:18). Indeed, the “entire fullness of deity dwells bodily” in this Messiah and Wisdom of God, in whose death God has reconciled all things — again in heaven and on earth — making us alive together with him so that we, in turn, might come to bodily fullness in him (Colossians 1:19-20; 2:9-10).” <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-18-3/commentary-on-colossians-31-11-4> .

Scripture Appointed for Today:

The Collect

Let your continual mercy, O Lord, cleanse and defend your Church; and, because it cannot continue in safety without your help, protect and govern it always by your goodness; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Old Testament - Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14; 2:18-23

Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.

I, the Teacher, when king over Israel in Jerusalem, applied my mind to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven; it is an unhappy business that God has given to human beings to be busy with. I saw all the deeds that are done under the sun; and see, all is vanity and a chasing after wind.

I hated all my toil in which I had toiled under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to those who come after me -- and who knows whether they will be wise or foolish? Yet they will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity. So I turned and gave my heart up to despair concerning all the toil of my labors under the sun, because sometimes one who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave all to be enjoyed by another who did not toil for it. This also is vanity and a great evil. What do mortals get from all the toil and strain with which they toil under the sun? For all their days are full of pain, and their work is a vexation; even at night their minds do not rest. This also is vanity.

The Psalm - Psalm 49:1-11

1 Hear this, all you peoples;
hearken, all you who dwell in the world, *
you of high degree and low, rich and poor together.

2 My mouth shall speak of wisdom, *
and my heart shall meditate on understanding.

3 I will incline my ear to a proverb *
and set forth my riddle upon the harp.

4 Why should I be afraid in evil days, *
when the wickedness of those at my heels surrounds me,

5 The wickedness of those who put their trust in their goods, *
and boast of their great riches?

6 We can never ransom ourselves, *
or deliver to God the price of our life;

7 For the ransom of our life is so great, *
that we should never have enough to pay it,

8 In order to live for ever and ever, *
and never see the grave.

9 For we see that the wise die also;
like the dull and stupid they perish *
and leave their wealth to those who come after them.

10 Their graves shall be their homes for ever,
their dwelling places from generation to generation, *
though they call the lands after their own names.

11 Even though honored, they cannot live for ever; *
they are like the beasts that perish.

The Epistle - Colossians 3:1-11

If you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.

Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry). On account of these the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient. These are the ways you also once followed, when you were living that life. But now you must get rid of all such things-- anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!

The Gospel - Luke 12:13-21

Someone in the crowd said to Jesus, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." But he said to him, "Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?" And he said to them, "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." Then he told them a parable: "The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?' Then he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.' But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God."

Playlist:

If A Tree Falls... (Bruce Cockburn)

Rain forest
Mist and mystery
Teeming green
Green brain facing lobotomy
Climate control centre for the world
Ancient cord of coexistence
Hacked by parasitic greedhead scam—
From Sarawak to Amazonas
Costa Rica to mangy B.C. hills—
Cortege rhythm of falling timber
What kind of currency grows in these new deserts
These brand new flood plains?

[Chorus]
If a tree falls in the forest does anybody hear?
If a tree falls in the forest does anybody hear?
Anybody hear the forest fall?

Cut and move on
Cut and move on

Take out trees
Take out wildlife at a rate of species every single day
Take out people who've lived with this
For a hundred thousand years—
Inject a billion burgers worth of beef—
Grain eaters—methane dispensers
Through thinning ozone
Waves fall on wrinkled earth—
Gravity, light, ancient refuse of stars
Speak of a drowning—
But this, this is something other
Busy monster eats dark holes in the spirit world
Where wild things have to go
To disappear
Forever

[Chorus]
If a tree falls in the forest does anybody hear?
If a tree falls in the forest does anybody hear?
Anybody hear the forest fall?
If a tree falls in the forest does anybody hear?
If a tree falls in the forest does anybody hear?
Anybody hear the forest fall?

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Mercy Mercy Me (The Ecology)

Song by Marvin Gaye

Here we have something for you folks, we hope
You enjoy it as we enter our social section, thank you

Woah, ah, mercy, mercy me
Ah, things ain't what they used to be (ain't what they used to be)
Where did all the blue skies go?
Poison is the wind that blows
From the north and south and east

Woah mercy, mercy me, yeah
Ah, things ain't what they used to be (ain't what they used to be)
Oil wasted on the ocean and upon our seas
Fish full of mercury

Oh Jesus, yeah, mercy, mercy me, ah
Ah, things ain't what they used to be (ain't what they used to be)
Radiation underground and in the sky
Animals and birds who live nearby are dying

Hey, mercy, mercy me, oh
Hey, things ain't what they used to be
What about this overcrowded land?
How much more abuse from man can she stand?

Oh, na, na, na
Oh, oh, oh, oh, oh
Hey, ooh, woo

Source: [Musixmatch](#)

Songwriters: Gaye Marvin P

Mercy Mercy Me (The Ecology) lyrics © Nmg Music, Mgiiii Music, Fcg Music, Jobete Music Co Inc

God of Wonders

Song by Third Day

Lord of all creation
 Lord of water, earth and sky
 The heavens are your Tabernacle
 Glory to the Lord on high

And God of wonders beyond our galaxy
 You are holy, holy
 The universe declares Your majesty
 You are holy, holy
 Lord of heaven and earth
 Lord of heaven and earth

So early in the morning
 I will celebrate the light
 As I stumble in the darkness
 I will call your name by night

God of wonders beyond our galaxy
 You are holy, holy
 The universe declares Your majesty
 You are holy, holy

Lord of heaven and earth
 Lord of heaven and earth
 Lord of heaven and earth
 Lord of heaven and earth

Hallelujah! To the Lord of heaven and earth
 Hallelujah! To the Lord of heaven and earth
 Hallelujah! To the Lord of heaven and earth

The God of wonders beyond our galaxy (You)
 You are holy, holy
 Precious Lord, reveal Your heart to me
 Father, holy, holy (Lord God Almighty)

The universe declares Your majesty (You are holy)
 You are holy (yes you are), holy (holy You are)
 Holy (Jesus saves), holy

Hallelujah! To the Lord of heaven and earth
 Hallelujah! To the Lord of heaven and earth

Source: [Musixmatch](#) Songwriters: Hindalong Steve J /
 Byrd Carey Marcus; God of Wonders lyrics © Never Say
 Never Songs, Meaux Mercy Publishing, Storm Boy Music,
 New Spring Publishing Inc.

All Things New

Song by [Steven Curtis Chapman](#)

You spoke and made the sunrise,
to light up the very first day
You breathed across the water,
and started the very first wave
It was You
You introduced Your glory,
to every living creature on earth
And they started singing,
the first song to ever be heard
They sang for You

You make all things new
You make all things new

Then the world was broken,
fallen and battered and scarred
You took the hopeless, the life, wasted, ruined and
marred
And made it new

You make all things new
You make all things new
You redeem and You transform
You renew and You restore
You make all things new
You make all things new
And forever we will watch and worship You

You turn winter into spring
You take every living thing
And You breathe Your breath of life into it over and
over again

You make the sunrise, day after day after day
But there's a morning coming, when old things will
all pass away
And everyone will see

You make all things new
You make all things new
Come redeem and come transform
Come renew and come restore
You make all things new
You make all things new
And forever we will watch and worship You

Now and forever You are making all things new
You're making all things new

Hallelujah

Songwriters: Steven Curtis Chapman; All Things New
lyrics © BMG Rights Management, Capitol Christian
Music Group, Capitol CMG Publishing

Quotes:

- “What you do makes a difference, and you have to decide what kind of difference you want to make.” - Dr. Jane Goodall
- “The world must come together to confront climate change. There is little scientific dispute that if we do nothing, we will face more drought, famine and mass displacement that will fuel more conflict for decades.” - Barack Obama
- “When the well is dry, we know the worth of water.” - Benjamin Franklin
- “Preservation of our environment is not a liberal or conservative challenge, it's common sense.”
- Ronald Reagan
- “Earth provides enough to satisfy every man's need, but not every man's greed.”
- Mahatma Gandhi

R.E.M. “Fall on Me” excerpt:

There's the progress we have found (when the rain)
 A way to talk around the problem (when the children reign)
 Building towered foresight (keep your conscience in the dark)
 Isn't anything at all (melt the statues in the park)
 Buy the sky and sell the sky and bleed the sky and tell the sky

Don't fall on me (what is it up in the air for?) (it's gonna fall)
 Fall on me (if it's there for long) (it's gonna fall)
 Fall on me (it's over, it's over me) (it's gonna fall)

Mexican nuns breeding endangered salamanders to make them into a cough syrup could save species from extinction

Convent originally kept amphibians to make 'jarabe' medicine from their skin, but are now helping boost species' numbers after habitat started deteriorating

Geoffrey Giller Monday 06 August 2018



Ambystoma dumerilii, known by locals as achoques, are found nowhere but Lake Pátzcuaro but their numbers are falling fast (*Shutterstock*)

Atop the highest hill in this lakeside town sits the Basílica de Nuestra Señora de la Salud, built in the 1500s with whitewashed walls and red stone columns.

On a street around the corner from the basilica, a wooden door framed in carved stone and

marked with a cross fleury stands open from 9am until 2pm, and again from 4pm to 6pm. "We pray for you," reads a sign on the door in Spanish.

Inside, the room is sparse and dark save for a wooden window and three locked doors. Behind them is a convent, home to two dozen **nuns** of the Dominican Order.

But the convent also hosts an even larger number of very unexpected residents: a thriving colony of endangered **salamanders**. Scientists call them *Ambystoma dumerilii*, but the nuns and everyone else in Pátzcuaro call them achoques.

Carefully tended by the nuns, about 300 achoques live in glass aquaria and white enamel bathtubs lining the walls of a long hallway and two adjoining rooms in the convent. The nuns support themselves partly by selling a cough syrup called jarabe made from the salamanders' skin.

But the basilica's achoques are increasingly valuable for another reason.

They are found nowhere but Lake Pátzcuaro, and outside the convent their numbers are falling fast. There are smaller captive colonies elsewhere in Pátzcuaro, but none as large as the one in the basilica. It may be critical to the salamanders' prospects in the wild.

"That is why we consider that the nuns will be very vital in the future," said Gerardo Garcia, a curator and expert on endangered species at the Chester Zoo in England.



Interior of the church of Janitzio Island, Lake Patzcuaro, Mexico (*Michel SETBOUN/Gamma-Rapho via Getty Images*)

The salamanders are wondrous little monsters with granular skin the colour of Dijon mustard. They resemble miniature versions of the flying dragon-dog Falkor in "The Neverending Story."

As salamanders go, they're huge — the largest ones approach a foot in length. But most striking are their gills: luxurious, ruddy filaments that frame their heads like manes and undulate gently in the water.

In the basilica, their main caretaker is Sister Ofelia Morales Francisco. On a recent visit, she greeted a visitor in a white habit, her black veil crisp and pinned in place, a blue-beaded rosary dangling by her side.

Asked a question, she sometimes answered only with a small smile. But around the achoques, she opens up, proud to show off her amphibious charges.

Youth carry bouquets of cempasuchil flowers in a cemetery at the outskirt of Patzcuaro (Miguel Tovar/LatinContent/Getty Images) (*Miguel Tovar/LatinContent/Getty Images*)

Their tanks are spotless, each with a bubbling aerator made from half of a plastic soda bottle filled with stones and coiled fabric. In a glass case above the tanks, a baby Jesus dressed as a doctor keeps watch.

The sisters used to make their syrup using salamanders collected from the lake. When they began to disappear, the nuns established the convent's colony because they were worried about losing the jarabe business.

"What would we do — not make any syrup?" Sister Ofelia said in Spanish. But eventually she and the other nuns also came to recognise a conservation imperative in their work.



“It’s about protecting a species from nature,” she said. “If we don’t work to take care of it, to protect it, it will disappear from creation.”

Like axolotls, their flamboyant, better-known cousins, achoques live their entire lives underwater. As adults, they keep the external gills that most salamanders have only as aquatic larvae.

As the number of people living around Lake Pátzcuaro, one of the largest in Mexico, has steadily increased over the centuries, the water quality has suffered. Runoff exacerbated by deforestation carries silt and pollution into the lake.

Untreated sewage is still dumped into water, and an invasive hyacinth spreads along its shores. Cow pastures extend right to the lake’s marshy edges.

To make matters worse, largemouth bass intentionally were introduced into Lake Pátzcuaro in the 1930s, and in 1974 the much more destructive carp were brought in. They eat the eggs and larvae of the achoques.

Between 1982 and 2010, the already shallow lake declined by about 13 feet, losing a quarter of its total volume because of declining rainfall and increasing runoff carried into the lake. Various efforts to rehabilitate Pátzcuaro have met only limited success.

Achoques aren’t the only Mexican salamanders in trouble. Of the 17 species in their genus found in Mexico, 12 are listed as endangered or critically endangered by the International Union for Conservation of Nature.

Worldwide, salamanders face numerous threats, from habitat loss to the illegal pet trade. A new fungus has been killing salamanders in Europe.



Lake Patzcuaro, Mexico (*Bruno PEROUSSE/Gamma-Rapho via Getty Images*)

At Lake Pátzcuaro, fishermen have been catching and eating achoques since before the Spanish arrived in Mexico. In the late 1970s and early 80s, achoques caught in the lake were piled high at the fish market in town, recalled Brad Shaffer, a professor of biology at the University of California, Los Angeles, who has studied the salamanders.

But the numbers of achoques started to fluctuate wildly in the ‘80s and crashed in 1989. In 1985, a friar suggested that the nuns start their own colony because the lake was deteriorating, according to Sister Ofelia.

It wasn't until 2000 that the nuns had their own thriving community of salamanders in the convent. The nuns have been cooking up jarabe, however, for nearly a century.

"People have faith in it because the nuns make it," said Dolores Huacuz, an expert on the region's amphibians and a retired university professor.

Local legend has it that the sisters got the secret recipe from a young **Purépecha** woman, one of the indigenous people who lived in this region before Spanish colonisation.

Her jarabe cured one of the sisters, strengthening her lungs and abolishing her anemia. And the identity of that young woman, according to the story: the Virgin Mary herself, in disguise.



Whether or not the cough syrup recipe came to the nuns through divine intervention, there's no doubt that the Purépecha people were eating achoques and using them for medicine long before the arrival of Europeans and Catholicism, according to Tzintia Velarde Mendoza, a project coordinator at Faunam, a wildlife conservation group, who has studied the cultural history of the achoques.

Garcia, of the Chester Zoo, has been working with a team based in Mexico to survey Lake Pátzcuaro to try to figure out how many salamanders are left in the wild, and where in the lake they live.

"Jumping into reintroduction programmes looks very sexy in the media for one news release, but that's really not the best way to do it," Garcia said.

There are still wild achoques left in the lake, Garcia said, including a small population in the northern part of the lake. Fishermen have told Garcia's team that they do occasionally spot the salamanders.

But as the population has thinned, so has its genetic diversity. That's where the convent's thriving colony may one day make an enormous difference — assuming it is genetically diverse itself.

Three hundred individuals, if they're relatively unrelated, is a very, very healthy, large stock to be working from," Shaffer said.

At the moment, however, there are no plans to move achoques from the convent to the lake. Before that happens, the water quality issues must be addressed, Garcia said, and the genetic diversity of the nuns' colony must be assessed. Work on both issues is ongoing, he said.

In the room where the nuns sell their cough syrup, a mural on the wall depicts the lake with salamanders swimming in clear waters. The glowing hands of a nun hold an achoque beside an image of the Virgin Mary.

“Being part of a religious order like ours is not an obstacle for scientific progress,” Sister Ofelia said.

“The order is devoted to the research of theological and scientific knowledge in benefit of humanity,” she added. Part of the order’s mission is “to work in favour of a more humane conscience full of love and justice for nature.”

Another mural bears the official name of the nuns’ Management Unit for the Conservation of Wildlife, registered with the Mexican government: Jimbani Erandi. In the language of the indigenous Purépecha people, it means “new dawn.”

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