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Annual Forum of Christian Meditation Ireland – Jane Mellett

“The antidote to the ecological crisis is contemplation”

Laudato Si', Pope Francis' letter on Care for Our Common Home, is written to “every single person living on this planet” (LS, 14). It is a document of faith in dialogue with science and offers us a beautiful spirituality to help us engage with the multiple crises our world currently faces. *Laudato Si'* urges all of us to listen to the cry of the earth and to the cry of those made poor; to listen to the signs of the times. What are those signs of the times right now? We are being invited to really hear the cry of the earth, the cry of the poor, to listen to the science, to listen to the call of our faith and the youth of the world.

Laudato Si' is deeply rooted in the spirituality of St. Francis of Assisi, the patron saint of ecology, and it invites us to put on the *lens* of St. Francis as we look out at the world, to try to see the world as St. Francis did, with a familial love. We are probably all familiar with the prayer of St. Francis, the Canticle of Creatures where he says, “*Praise be to you my Lord through our Sister, Mother Earth who sustains and governs us, and who produces various fruit with coloured flowers and herbs.*” We too are invited to see all of God's creation as ‘Sister’ and ‘Mother’.

Laudato Si' is a very mystical document, yes, it is rooted in environmental science but it is very much faith in dialogue with science. In Chapter 2 we read that “*the solutions to the ecological crisis will not emerge from just one way of interpreting and transforming reality. Respect must be shown for the various cultural riches of different people, their art and poetry but also their interior life and spirituality. If we are truly concerned about remedying the damage done to our common home, then no branch of the sciences and no form of wisdom can be left out*” (LS, 63).

Laudato Si' invites us to embrace an ‘Integral Ecology’ and that is simply acknowledging just how deeply interconnected everything is; recognising how the climate and biodiversity crises underpin so many other crises and are related to our economic and political systems, healthcare, migration, education, food security, war etc. It also means that we recognise that the solutions to this crisis must also be interconnected, have an interdisciplinary approach, one which keeps the whole Earth community, not just us human beings, at its core. For people of faith, the solutions to this crisis include how

we pray, how we worship, our theologies and spirituality, particularly cultivating a nourishing ecological spirituality.

It may have surprised some people when in 2020 Pope Francis said the following: “The antidote to our ecological crisis is contemplation. To contemplate is to grant oneself the time to be silent, to pray, to restore harmony to the soul, the healthy balance between head, heart and hands, between thought, feeling and action...” (Pope Francis, September 16th 2020 General Audience).

In *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis is clear that the roots of the ecological crisis are deeply spiritual because when we peel the layers of climate and biodiversity crises apart, we see what is at the heart of it – that we have forgotten who we are and where we come from, we are not at peace with ourselves nor one another, which ultimately must contribute to the fact that we are a species determined to destroy our only home for economic gain. We have to ‘mind the gap’ within, that space which can only be filled with an awareness of the Divine presence, but which, as a species, we are filling with other things, such as rampant consumerism for example. In contemplation, Pope Francis invites us to really **pay attention to what is happening**, to **listen** to the cry of the earth; but also to listen to creation’s beautiful song. Meditation helps us to cultivate this attentiveness. It is a space where we can say ‘stop’, pause, take a breath, be still and listen to the One who is calling us out of this darkness and into their mystical, loving light. It provides space for an internal Sabbath rest.

It might be worth noting here that I use here the terms meditation and contemplation interchangeably, understanding them as silent prayer practices in which we open ourselves to experiencing God's presence and love in all of creation, including ourselves. I find this reflection from the *Laudato Si'* Movement particularly helpful: “The traditional Christian understanding of the distinction of meditation and contemplation is that in meditation we are doing the action, such as when meditating on Scripture, our breath, or a sacred word. In contemplation God is acting. Through meditation we are actively putting ourselves in the presence of God and in the process might receive the grace of contemplation or union of God. Consider the analogy of the garden. Meditation can be seen like gardening, where one actively tills the soil, plants seeds, and waters the plants. However the gardener does not make anything actually blossom. His or her work only creates the conditions for the growth to happen, which is a gift from God, like contemplation.”

In *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis, quoting Pope Benedict, makes this point: "The external deserts of the world are growing because the internal deserts have become so vast". In that General Audience address I quoted earlier, he also notes that without contemplation, it is easy to fall prey to an unbalanced and arrogant anthropocentrism, the "I" at the centre of everything, which overinflates our role as human beings, positioning us as absolute rulers of all other creatures. (Pope Francis, Sept 16th, 2020). There are numerous calls made in *Laudato Si'*, but the call to address these *interior deserts* is the starting point of all ecological action, particularly for a Christian. We also read that "Living our vocation to be protectors of God's handiwork is **essential** to a life of virtue; it is not an **optional** or a secondary aspect of our Christian experience." What Christians are called to, therefore, is a profound ecological conversion" (LS 217). And this, I strongly believe, is the role of the faith community in addressing the crises which are before us.

In what spaces do we experience ecological conversion? Contemplative practice is essential to this because we can experience ecological conversion, if we re-connect with the natural world and the beauty which is around us; re-kindling a child-like sense of awe and wonder where our relationship with God's creation is concerned. *Laudato Si'* invites us to take example from the much-loved St. Francis of Assisi saying, "Just as what happens when we fall in love with someone, whenever [St. Francis] would gaze at the sun, the moon or the smallest of animals, he burst into song, drawing all other creatures into his praise." (LS, 11.)

We are invited into a real movement of the heart where we can begin to see the Risen Christ present in all of creation, Creation imbued with his radiant presence, where we begin to see again the fingerprints of God in the forests, in a wildflower, in a blade of grass, in the depth of life beneath the seas. There are many beautiful, mystical passages in *Laudato Si'* to help us in this endeavour, particularly in chapter 2 where we read: "The entire material universe speaks of God's love, his boundless affection for us. Soil, water, mountains: everything is, as it were, a caress of God" (LS, 84). Have we really considered this? Do we really look out at our world and see all the created elements, all matter, all species, as a caress of God? That each thing carries within it something of this Divine spark? Through contemplating creation, we can sense each creature singing the hymn of its existence i.e. is to live joyfully in God's love and hope.

So, in *Laudato Si'* we are invited first of all, the first thing we are asked to do, is to go back to the spaces in nature which are most dear to us. To rekindle a sense of awe and wonder for creation, to fall in love again with the earth, because we will only protect what we love. This movement of the heart, this ecological conversion requires a deep awareness and an attentiveness which can be cultivated from spiritual practices such as meditation.

This contemplation of creation allows us to discover in each thing a teaching which God wishes to hand on to us, since “for the believer, to contemplate creation is to hear a message, to listen to a paradoxical and silent voice” (LS, 85).

And I suppose that this activity should come with a warning, because once we enter into this space of attentiveness, we begin to become painfully aware of what is happening to the world, we are invited to make this our own painful suffering so that we can discern where we are begin called to act. The ecological crisis is complex, multi-layered and we are more than aware of the rise in eco-anxiety / climate anxiety especially amongst young people in our world or in fact amongst anyone whose eyes are open to the unravelling of our ecosystems. “God has joined us so closely to the world around us that we can feel the desertification of the soil almost as a physical ailment, and the extinction of a species as a painful disfigurement.” (LS, 89).

Meditation and contemplation is one of our key starting points. It can be transformative... its many physical and mental benefits are well known, it can transform those who sit for even 20 minutes per day, it can transform our relationships with those around us, our loved ones, with those we don't know or don't even like, with living beings and with all of creation.

Each time a person stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve life for others, they send out a ripple of hope. In meditation we cross each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, those ripples build a current that can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and injustice. We need people who experience the inner joy of the Divine. Author Andrew Harvey (in his book, *The Hope*,) calls these people *Sacred Activists*, where this inner joy becomes visible in outer action. As people of faith engaged in addressing the climate crises we are called to act from a deep compassion and wisdom, be committed to *being*, be committed to being centres of hope, cultivating these ripples of hope and energy. We start with a transformation of ourselves, deeply rooted to the Creator. *Sacred Activists* bring the consciousness of the

Sacred into all they do as agents of profound change. Harvey puts it beautifully when he says that this opens “a shaft of grace that inspires a person to make a difference”. Seeing the sacred in all things and in the smallest details of your own life, is an act of profound activism.

As Pope Francis shared in LS, at the root of our ecological crisis is a deep spiritual crisis, he notes: “Nature is filled with words of love, but how can we listen to them amid constant noise, interminable and nerve-wracking distractions...?” (LS 225). This is why, one of the three objectives of the Laudato Si’ Movement is Ecological Spirituality. Once a week the LSM community come together online for contemplative practice in order to support our ecological conversion and the healing of our common home through contemplation. We have five standard contemplative practices: Christian Loving Kindness meditation; Lectio Divina with Nature; meditating on a favourite place in nature; the St. Francis Chaplet; and a Meditation on the Four elements of air, earth, fire and water. There is also an [Ecological Examen](#)—a practice rooted in the Ignatian practice of examen but which specifically explores our relationship with creation; and much more. It is through practices like these, and in my view any contemplative practice, where we learn how to pay attention, where we are nourished for the tasks ahead, where we open our hearts and mind to Creator God and Creation itself.

Contemplation opens up the space in our hearts and minds to hear these words. We are then able to listen to God in creation, the voices and cries of our sisters and brothers, and discern wise action that is rooted in love and Wisdom, instead of compulsion. The weekly sessions offered by the Laudato Si’ Movement, strive to offer an ongoing community of support to cultivate this **capacity of deep presence**: that can rejoice in creation’s song, God’s love message to us. These times of silent contemplation are a way of opening our hearts to allow God’s healing love to flow to our planet and human family. These times of silence are dedicated to our Creator for the healing of our earth and the healing of the entire earth community. It is through practices such as these we hope that people will rekindle a sense of awe and wonder for creation in joyful praise to God but also, and equally as important, that we are sustained and nourished by God’s spirit and grace to continue to work for ecological justice.

Meditation connects us with our true selves, it restores the balance of our inner ecology or our interiority, restores relationships with one another, with

the whole earth community.... “When we can see God reflected in all that exists, our hearts are moved to praise the Lord for all his creatures and to worship him in union with them.” (LS 87)

I’ve been to a number of United Nation’s Climate Conferences (known as COPs) and while they can be places which cause much anxiety and disillusionment, at COP26 I saw something different. Thousands of people gathered on the periphery of the COP venue from faith-based communities, across all faiths, and they were singing a different tune... they were dreaming, creating, in dialogue, many of them were meditating around the venue all day every day and in various spaces across Glasgow. Authentic Christian faith and spirituality offers us hope, this hope gives us the spiritual energy and grace which is needed to work for change even when the situation seems quite hopeless. It is an act of peaceful protest. It is slow work, and that is why the Laudato Si’ Movement talks about the **slow-fast paradox**. We must go slow because this concerns our interiority, a movement of the heart, but we must also go fast because the situation is so urgent.

Irish theologian Donal Dorr says that, “If religious communities can join hands with [ecological] movements they may well be able to provide the momentum that is needed for the world to move forward, because religious communities transcend nation states and they acknowledge intergenerational, long term responsibilities. When things seem hopeless we must remember that, “Down through Christian history there has been a succession of heroic people who have been inspired by Jesus and led by his Spirit to follow his example in taking on apparently impossible tasks. They challenge us to do the same.” (A Creed for Today, p.215).

To finish, the role of the faith community in the ecological crises is to create space for and nourish a genuine ecological conversion. Christian spirituality proposes an alternative understanding of the quality of life, and encourages a prophetic and contemplative lifestyle, one capable of deep enjoyment free of the obsession with consumption. It helps us to take up an ancient lesson found in different religious traditions and also in the Bible. It is the conviction that “less is more” (Laudato Si’ 222). Contemplation reminds us that nature not only manifests God but is a locus of God’s presence, inviting us into deeper relationship, and that on its own should be enough for us to do everything in our power to protect our common home.

So the next time you sit in meditation, know that you are part of this ecological revolution that is needed for our world right now, that you are part of this beautiful earth community, intimately linked to all that exists, a ripple of hope-filled energy which flows outward, which nourishes, which helps us to discern how to respond. Meditation is an essential tool in this so that we can really pay attention, so that we fall in love again with the earth, with Creation and with the Creator.

Pope Francis encourages us: “For we know that things can change (LS, 13)... Truly much can be done!” (LS, 180).