

Helen Grealy, RC

Loving Sister Earth

Good morning to you all. I am here to speak to you about *Loving Sister Earth*, a movement of prayer and care for our earth.

It is lovely to be connected to you and also to carry a sense of being connected to all of God's creation. We were meant to have met this time last year and look how our world has changed since then. Covid-19 has brought suffering right across the globe. People's lives have been changed and many are asking deep questions about the meaning of life itself. In the midst of the chaos, there is a renewed appreciation of things that we have often taken for granted such as family, friends, fresh air and the natural world around us. Many people have turned to prayer, to a closer relationship with God and some are developing a sense of belonging to the human family with the earth as our common home. We are seeing and experiencing first-hand what the poets and mystics have been telling us for centuries, the interconnectedness of all created reality. Our consciousness is coming to a new awareness of our oneness with our evolving universe. From this contemplative stance the call to live 'our green mission' is experienced in the depth of our being.

At one level it is humbling to speak to you about *Loving Sister Earth* as it is fairly new and you have been involved in the green mission for so long now. However, I will outline how *Loving Sister Earth* came to being and explore its spiritual ethos. It is founded on the bedrock of our own native spirituality, a creation-focused spirituality. This spirituality is known and popularized today as *Celtic Spirituality*. I will give examples of how the earlier Druidic religion and the Gospel message integrated so well it produced what we might call a green Christianity. I am aware that you come from many parts of our world and that you have been and are engaged in wonderful ministries in countries very different to your own. You

know what it is like to enter a new way of life and to embrace another culture. Over many years' missionaries have worked hard to enculture the Gospel message. We see this in beautiful Liturgies where worship is expressed bodily in the local dance and song. Sadly, we also know that indigenous spiritualities were often repressed by Christianity in the past. The word 'paganism' needs to be redeemed. The word itself actually refers to the countryside and most native religions have great respect for the earth. Can we now engage in the process of recovering some of the great wisdom that was handed down from generation to generation and allow it to be integrated into the Christian message? Hopefully this pathway will help to introduce love where there was fear, peace where there was strife and harmony where there was disconnection.

Loving Sister Earth has as its inspiration a desire for universal harmony, a perceived and experienced unity with our God, each other and all of nature.



Our Mission Statement

'We believe that life is all about love. We live in a turbulent world where there is abuse of natural resources and disharmony caused by the inequality of gender, race and wealth. Pope Francis is calling for all people to take responsibility for our world. Our aim is to foster a movement of prayer and care of our Common Home which will be rooted in our own sacred ground and carried by our people'.

Loving Sister Earth is our humble attempt to live ‘our green mission’. Our goal is to help Ireland to become a country that prays and acts for our earth. While *Loving Sister Earth* is only 7 years old, it is having a strong impact. The statistics for the hits on our website are quite phenomenal. At one level this comes as a surprise to us, however, at a deeper level, it is not so surprising. We are very aware that *Loving Sister Earth* is born of the Spirit. We did not set out to create yet another ‘Care of the Earth’ group. Individually, each of us had a strong sense that God was asking something of us. We are just a small group; Elaine, Brian, Phyllis and I, working with Marion who created and updates our website. Brian and Phyllis facilitated many Prayer Initiatives at Diocesan and National levels and share a desire for a global prayer movement. As we know deep prayer involves entering into the transformative inner journey and bringing about harmony between body, mind, feelings and spirit. The more inner harmony we experience the more

we can contribute to the harmony of our world. Elaine is drawn to the mystery of the Trinity and relationship is at the heart of the Trinity and of creation itself. Elaine feels that our world deeply needs a Divine breakthrough of love. In my ministry of Retreats and Spiritual Direction, I have seen the transformative power of the Spirit working deeply in people’s lives and realize that a global transformation is possible. While we were ministering separately in our own areas, it was my cry for help that brought us

together. I became aware that I was experiencing a call concerning Church transformation and in my search for help to respond to this call, I found my present companions. We began with meetings that were more a discerning process than working with an agenda. We were led to *create Loving Sister Earth*. The publication of *Laudato Si* the following year 2015 was a confirmation for us.

An inspirational backdrop to *Loving Sister Earth* is a message that has come down to us from Cardinal Newman. Being aware of the rich history of Christianity in the countries of

Northern Europe from the 4th century onwards, Newman wrote that these places were the ‘storehouse of the past and the birthplace of the future’. As Christianity developed in the countries on the edge of Europe a very distinctive spirituality emerged. Basically, there was an integration of the beliefs and spirituality of the old Druidic religion and those of Christianity.

Inculturation “Irish-style”

What happened in these early centuries in Ireland can be a model for the countries that

you live and work in today. When St Patrick came to Ireland in 432, he was already familiar with the language, customs and way of life of the people, as in his youth he had spent time in this country in captivity. A good example this inculturation is a legendary dialogue that took place between Eithne, the daughter of King Laoghaire, and Patrick. Eithne asked Patrick where his God lived, was it in the heavens, or the earth, in the mountains or the valleys, in the seas or the rivers and did his God have sons and daughters and were



(St. Mary's University at Bayongbong Nueva Vizcaya, RP)

they beautiful. These questions reflected her religious belief. Patrick listened to her, received what she said and responded;

*Our God is the God of all things,
the God of the heavens and earth,
the God of the seas and streams,
the God of the sun, moon and stars,
the God of the great mountains
and the deep glens,
the God above heaven and in heaven
and under heaven,
and our God has a household-heaven
and earth, and the sea and all they contain.*

As we see, Patrick echoed what Eithne has said, using her language. He entered into her experience and facilitated her to come to a new and deeper experience of God. Patrick's mission was very successful. By the 6th century Christianity was flourishing in Ireland with monasteries of men and women all over the country. These monasteries became centers of prayer, scholarship, and artistic expression. They were places of spiritual nourishment for the people as there was no parish or diocesan structure in Ireland until the 12th century. Monks went forth from these monasteries and helped to re-establish the Christian faith in Europe. Christianity was established on the bedrock of a creation-focused spirituality that came forth from the union of the nature mysticism of the Druidic religion and the Gospel message of love, forgiveness, peace, and joy. What a legacy St Patrick left. We know that his feast day is currently celebrated worldwide. This celebration has possibly more to do with the nostalgia of the Irish diaspora than recognition of faith. Wouldn't it be wonderful if the 'greening' of the iconic buildings of the world that takes place on March 17th could be used to raise awareness of the need to live a green mission?

God in all of creation

Loving Sister Earth is inspired by the mystical sense of God's presence in all of creation that is found in this early Christianity. The people of that time lived close to the earth; they were

people of the land whose very existence depended on the regular return of the seasons. They were in tune with nature and its cyclical rhythm of growth, decay and growth again. Behind this extraordinary natural rhythm, the people sensed the invigorating energy, power and dynamism of the Divine. This creative energy of the Divine was referred to in old Irish (Gaelic) as *Neart De*, God's energy. *Neart De*, they believed, pervaded the entire universe and enabled the birds to fly, the fish to swim, the crops to grow, the changes to occur in the seasons. Basically, our ancestors in the faith had a contemplative sense of God's presence in all of creation. *It is extremely important that our care of the earth today should come from a contemplative place within ourselves. A transformation of our own consciousness is the best gift we can bring to our green mission.* A spirituality sustained by love of our beautiful bio-diverse universe is the best motivation for becoming involved in the saving of our planet.



<https://gimnazium.jezsu.hu/index.php/component/k2/itemlist/category/2/feed?start=336>

The mystical sense of God's presence penetrating all of created reality is seen in the poetry, songs and prayers of these early Christians. It seems that our ancestors in the faith were in tune with the 'isness' or essence of all created reality. We will listen to a few selected lines of a poem reputed to have been recited by the bard Amergin on the arrival of the Celts in Ireland around the year 500 BC.

*I am the wind that breathes upon the sea.
I am the wave of the ocean.
I am murmur of the billows.
I am a beam of the sun.
I am the god who created in the head the fire.*

Who is it who throws light into the meeting on the mountains?

Who announces the ages of the moon?

Who teaches the place where couches the sun?

We cannot be sure if Amergin ever recited this poem but what it shows forth is a spirituality that recognizes the Divine Presence in all of creation, a spirituality that is still with us today.

We hear echoes of this creation- focused spirituality in the Breastplate prayers. These prayers ask for protection against the dark forces of life and nature. They had a pagan origin and were adopted by Christianity in the light of St Paul's letter to the Ephesians, 'Put on the amour of God, stand your ground with truth buckled around your waist and have integrity for a breastplate'. St Patrick's Breastplate, written in the 8th century captures the essence of the spirituality that had developed in the monasteries and among the people. The Breastplate shows a Christianity that is vibrant, Trinitarian, Christ-centered, in tune with creation and integral to the everyday lives of the people. The author of 'the Breastplate' calls on the Trinity, the angels, archangels, prophets and Christ in his mysteries, to give protection. In the fourth verse of this prayer it is the 'isness' or characteristics of nature that are called on; the light of sun, the radiance of moon, the splendour of fire, the speed of lightning, the swiftness of wind, the depth of sea, the stability of earth and the firmness of rock. This prayer begins and ends with a strong invocation to the Trinity. The people of this time were at home with the concept of our Triune God because their ancestors had believed in triple goddesses. An illustration of their intimate relationship with 'the Three' is seen in the following prayer:

Three folds in the cloth yet one cloth is there.

Three joints in the finger yet still one finger fair.

Three leaves in the shamrock yet one shamrock to wear.

Frost, snowflakes and ice all in water their origin share.

Three persons in God, to God alone we make prayer.



(taken from Loving Sister Earth, Facebook)

Ireland's Holy Wells

The line of the prayer we have just listened to 'Frost, snowflakes and ice all in water their origin share' is a powerful creation- focused image of our Triune God, the Divine energy invigorating all of creation. Water is one of the most precious gifts that nature has to offer and one we focus on in *Loving Sister Earth*. We are trying to revitalize an old devotion in a modern context. Praying at holy wells has a long tradition in Ireland and we are now encouraging people to pray and act for the protection and fair distribution of water both at home and across our world today.

Holy Wells are among the treasures in the storehouse of the past that can help to build our future. Ireland is rich with these treasures. We have ancient pilgrim paths, ruined monastic sites, holy mountains and islands, High Crosses with Scripture engravings, Round Towers, Beehive monastic cells, Mass rocks, and Illuminated Manuscripts, most notably, the Book of Kells, an inscribed account of the four Gospels with extraordinary artistic illumination. Nowadays, tourists and pilgrims are flocking to these sacred places. Many pilgrim paths and holy wells are being restored. Pilgrim paths all over the country are becoming Camino's. Our National TV Network recently relayed a program where our former President Mary McAleese walked these paths, making this

pilgrimage with some well-known people. Their conversation reflected their inner journey. In our *Loving Sister Earth* website, we have videos of people praying at some of these ancient monastic ruins and holy wells. Holy Wells are found throughout the country, numbering at least 3,000. The cult of these wells began in the times of the primitive natural religion and was integrated into the Christian faith and practice. These wells were blessed and dedicated to the saints and monastic founders and foundresses of early Christian times; Patrick, Brigid, who is patroness of the fertility of the land; Colmcille, otherwise known as Columba, a pilgrim for Christ; Ita, who founded churches all over the southern counties of Ireland and influenced Brendan the Navigator, who is said to have found America; Gobnet, who is patroness of bees, the preservation of which is a huge ecological issue today; Dympna, who is patroness of mental health and who is honoured in Gheel, near Antwerp, in Belgium whose inhabitants give special care to people suffering with mental health problems and Attracta who was known for her hospitality. It is interesting to note that a whole community of refugees have currently settled into the local community in the area where Attracta is most venerated, Ballaghaderreen Co. Roscommon. Not far away there is a holy well dedicated to her. The water of many of the wells is believed to have healing properties. Over the centuries pilgrimages to these wells have been very popular and were known as 'pattern days' from the word 'patron' which refers to the saint to whom the well is dedicated. Prayer rituals were preformed and these were often followed by a social event. Sometimes these events became rowdy and the practice was suppressed by Church authorities. However, a number of these 'pattern days' continue to this day. In '*Loving Sister Earth*' we have declared an annual National Holy Wells Day and ask people around the country to pray at their nearest well for the protection and fair distribution of water. As we know only too well, rivers and seas are polluted and some cities are suffering from shortage of clean fresh water. We hope

that the prayer at the wells will raise awareness of this world problem and inspire people to act towards resolving the situation. For National Holy Wells Day, we collaborate with the Columba community in Derry and Donegal which crosses the border between the Republic and Northern Ireland. This year *National Holy Wells Day* will be live-streamed by the Brigidine Sisters from Kildare at Brigid's Well on June 13th. We have written this prayer for the protection of water:

*O God of all creation,
Teach us how to protect water,
On which all living things depend,
Plants, animals, fish, birds,
And humans.
Help us to ensure that water
May always flow
Freely and purely
For all of your creation.
May your Spirit soften our hearts
And enlighten us,
So that we may act responsibly
To protect water,
The source of life
In our Common Home.*



(taken from Loving Sister Earth, Facebook)

Recent events

In 2018 the *World Meeting of Families* took place in Dublin. *Loving Sister Earth* worked in collaboration with Eco-Congregations, Churches together working for care of the earth; *Trocaire*, a Catholic development agency, and other groups to create a contemplative garden in the car park of a Poor Clare monastery. In this garden, hundreds of pilgrims walked the universe story honouring the different phases of creation. Next, they stopped at a native oak tree which had come from Derry, which name translates from the Irish language as ‘the oak’. Oak groves had been places of worship for the Druids and it is interesting to note that Columba and other Christian leaders of the 6th century founded their communities by the oak. The pilgrims then prayed at the holy well which was built especially for this occasion and is now a permanent feature of the monastery. This well was dedicated to St Broc, as requested by the Poor Clare nuns. St Broc was a woman who founded a monastic community in the 8th century in a place nearby called Donnybrook, a well-known area of Dublin. As with many town names in Ireland, the name Donnybrook is derived from the Irish language and linked to our early Christianity. ‘Domhach Broc’ means ‘The Church of Broc’. Pope Francis attended the World Meeting of Families but unfortunately didn’t get to the contemplative garden. However, Cardinal Tagle of the Philippines did visit, pray in and bless the garden and wished that many concrete places could become green again.

To summarize

So, as you see, *Loving Sister Earth* is one small though significant effort to live our green mission. Maybe some of the insights that have inspired us will be helpful to you as you continue your great ministry. In particular, it may be encouraging for people to explore more fully the native wisdom in your own area and learn how that can contribute to our green mission of today. Also, as emphasized throughout this reflection, our own inner journey has a tremendous role to play in the way forward. If the journey to authenticity was undertaken by us all then as balanced and rooted people we can change our world. By living harmoniously within ourselves we can make our contribution towards universal harmony. Our relationship with God and each other will be a pulsating powerful energy of pure love being poured out on our bio diverse universe. The more we are caught up in the love of our Triune God the more we will walk reverently on the face of the earth and live ‘our green mission’.

Let us end with *A Prayer for Universal Harmony*:

*‘Oh, Holy Spirit of God,
We stand united with all of humanity.
Open our hearts to the melody of your Divine love.*

We ask for healing of all we have damaged on this earth.

Bring us to a new place that we may learn to sing in perfect harmony with all of Creation’.

Amen.

