

Jane Mellett

The Call to Eco-Conversion

Good afternoon everyone, my name is Jane Mellett, and I am delighted to be with you today for this conference. I work as the Laudato Si' Officer for Trócaire, which is the overseas development agency of the Catholic Church in Ireland. My talk today is on "The Call to Ecological Conversion." This is an urgent call as outlined by Pope Francis in Laudato Si':

"The external deserts in the world are growing because the internal deserts have become so vast. ...For this reason, the ecological crisis is also a summons to a profound interior conversion." (LS, 17)

There are three aspect of this call for Eco-conversion that I would like to highlight today, the call to:

- 1. Personal Conversion**
- 2. Communal Conversion**
- 3. Ongoing Conversion**

Our Common Home

As we are aware, in 2015 Pope Francis published *Laudato Si'* and invited "every single person on this planet" into a conversation about what is happening to our world. This is a call for all people of all faiths and cultures.

"Saint Francis of Assisi reminds us that our common home is like a sister with whom we share our life, and a beautiful mother who opens her arms to embrace us....

(Laudato Si', 1).

This is the first step on our journey of ecological conversion, to *put on* the spirituality of St. Francis and to look out at God's creation as he did, to see all creatures as family – Brother Sun, Sister Moon, and to see Planet Earth as Our Common Home. This is the wider charism of *Laudato Si'* we are called to embrace as part of our personal eco-conversion.

Earth Rise

The famous photograph called "Earth Rise", taken in 1968 by the astronauts from the Apollo missions, who famously noted, "We went to the moon and instead discovered the Earth". So, what word or phrase comes to you as you look at this image? (*Pause*)

As this image was beamed around the world as part of a Christmas message, the text of Genesis 1 was read by one of the astronauts. This photograph is known as an important ecological photograph, as it was the first time the human saw their home planet from this perspective. It changed our psyche and evoked big questions for us, such as our place in the universe. This is our common home, the home we all share.



On Pilgrimage for the Climate

The Climate Pilgrimage

I would like to share with you today my personal story of eco-conversion. In 2018, I joined a group of Climate Pilgrims who were walking from the Vatican in Rome to the UN Climate Talks in Katowice, Poland (COP24). This was a journey of 1,500km. The goal was to bring the message of *Laudato Si'* from Pope Francis to everyone they met along the way and ultimately to the leaders of the 24th Conference of Parties (COP) on Climate change. In our group were pilgrims from the Philippines, some of whom were survivors of Typhoon Haiyan which struck the Philippines in 2013. This typhoon is known as the strongest storm ever recorded in human history to make landfall, killing 10,000 people

in just two hours and displacing millions of others.

Joanna Sustento, a survivor of Typhoon Haiyan, is a friend and fellow Climate Pilgrim. Joanna lost her entire family in Haiyan, her parents, brother, sister-in-law and three-year-old nephew, washed away by the storm surge. She was the only one to survive from her household that night. As I journeyed with Joanna on the climate pilgrimage, I began to realize the importance of hearing the human story where climate change is concerned.

Love of Neighbour

So, the question for me is: *What does love of neighbour look like in an era of ecological breakdown?* We must really SEE those on the frontlines of this crisis, victims of climate disasters, displacement of peoples due to sea-level rise, drought, water and food insecurity. The Gospels show us that Jesus sides with the oppressed, always. Catholic Social Teaching shows us that we must always have a Preferential option for the poor. So, part of this personal ecological conversion, for me, is to keep this question to the fore: what does love of neighbour look like in an era of ecological breakdown?

Biodiversity crisis

- Living Planet report in 2020 stated that 68% of wildlife has been destroyed in the period from 1970 – 2016 due to human activity.
- Every day around 8 million pieces of plastic makes their way into our oceans.
- 88% of the sea's surface is polluted by plastic waste.
- Ireland is the largest producer of plastic waste in the EU.

Degrowth

“The time has come to accept decreased growth in some parts of the world, in order to provide resources for other places to experience healthy growth.” (LS, 193)

1. Personal Eco-Conversion

In *Laudato Si'* we read: *“Our goal [is to] become **painfully aware**, to dare to turn what is happening to the world into our own **personal suffering** and thus to discover what each of us can do about it” (Laudato Si', 19).* Personal eco-conversion is a painful journey, it comes with a health warning. Psychologists now recognize that climate anxiety or ‘eco-mourning’ are becoming a real issue, especially amongst young people. So, this is difficult, it is not an easy journey. Pope Francis asks us to make the suffering of the world our own painful suffering. And we do feel it at a personal level whether we realize it or not. The ecological crisis affects us deeply because we are part of nature and dependent on it.

One shocking statistic I learned on the climate pilgrimage is that just 100 companies are responsible for 71% of global emissions. Just 100 companies! These are huge corporations with a lot of power. So even this example can leave us feel completely overwhelmed and helpless. It is important to recognize these feelings and name them as part of our personal eco-conversion. Yet, the call is to stay informed about the issues, to grow in painful awareness.

Signs of the Times

Laudato Si' urges us to examine the signs of the times in light of the gospel: Pope Francis calls us to **listen** to the cry of the earth, the cry of the poor, the science, the call of our faith and the youth of the world.



Reconnect with nature

Spiritual Crisis

So, where to begin. We hold this *painful awareness*, listening to the cry of the earth and the poor, but we cannot remain there only. It is one part of personal eco-conversion. At the heart of *Laudato Si'* is the reality that the roots of the ecological crisis are deeply spiritual. We have forgotten who we are and where we have come from. Pope Francis invites us to rekindle our relationship with God's creation, to look out at the world again with a child-like sense of awe and wonder. We must begin here.

My happy place is in the mountains, Carrauntoohil in Kerry, Ireland. It is where I feel deeply connected to nature and to God in nature. So, I ask you now, to reflect on your **favorite place in nature. Where is it? Connect to your senses, when you are there, what do you see, smell, touch, hear, how do you feel?** We are being urged to *reconnect* with these sacred places. *Laudato Si'* urges us to listen to the Book of Creation, nature itself.

"We cannot protect something we do not love; we cannot love what we do not know, and we cannot know what we do not see. And touch. And hear." – Richard Louv.

Rooted in the spirituality of St. Francis: *"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)

"St. Francis, faithful to Scripture, invites us to see nature as a magnificent book in which God speaks to us and grants us a glimpse of his infinite beauty and goodness." (LS, 12)

"We need to move from: a spirituality of the divine as revealed in words to a spirituality of the divine as revealed in the visible world about us." – Thomas Berry

A caress of God

There are beautiful mystical passages in *Laudato Si'* to help us on this journey: *"The entire material universe speaks of God's love, his boundless affection for us. Soil, mountains everything is, as it were, a caress of God."*

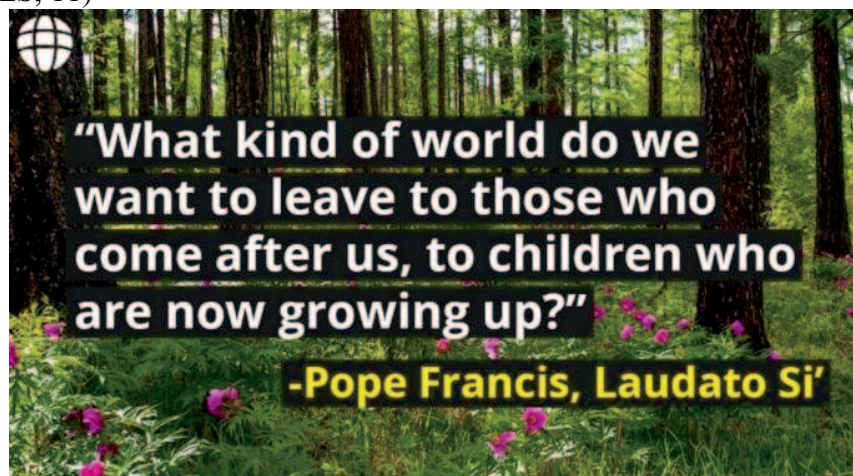
(LS 84)

We can meditate on these to grow in awareness that we are connected to one another, to the universe and to nature in ways we find it impossible to comprehend.

Profound Interior Conversion

The environmental crisis we are facing calls each of us into a profound interior conversion: *"Christians need an 'ecological conversion' where the effects of our encounter with Jesus Christ become evident in our lives and in our relationship with the world around us. 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."* (*Laudato Si'*, 217)

In the past, perhaps care for creation was seen as an 'added extra', something which a small group of people were interested in or perhaps it was something we looked at when other issues were resolved. However, *Laudato Si'* is clear that protecting God's creation is an essential part of the church's mission and our own personal call as followers of Christ.



2. Communal Conversion

As well as a Personal Eco-Conversion, we are called to Communal Conversion. And for me, in *Laudato Si'* the key part of this Communal Conversion is the call for our communities to embrace what Pope Francis calls an Integral Ecology. What is this? Pope Francis says,

- *“It cannot be emphasized enough how everything is interconnected. Time and space are not independent of one another, and not even atoms or subatomic particles can be considered in isolation.”* (LS, 138).
So integral ecology, as its basic, is the awareness of the **interconnectedness** of all things.
- *“Nature cannot be regarded as something separate from ourselves or a mere setting in which we live. We are part of nature, included in it and thus in constant interaction with it.”* (LS, 139).
- *Ecology*: A study (logos) of organisms in their home (from the Greek word οἶκος) and the vast web of interconnectedness that holds the universe together. We humans are part of this one sacred body.
- The terms Deep Ecology and Integral Ecology have become key in contemporary spiritual writers, theologians, anthropologists (Thomas Berry, Leonardo Boff, Teilhard de Chardin, Elizabeth Johnson, Ilio Delio).
- *“St. Francis is the example par excellence...of an integral ecology lived out joyfully and authentically.... He shows us just how inseparable the bond is between concern for nature, justice for the poor, commitment to society and interior peace.”* (LS, 10)

The Field Mouse

Did you know 99.9% of your DNA is shared with chimps; 85% of your DNA with a field mouse. 60% of your genes are shared with a banana! Did you know you share one third of your DNA with a primrose? It is time we reconnected with our cousins. *“It cannot be emphasized enough how everything is interconnected...”*

The Tree of Life

This is an image which fascinates me, the Tree of Life, the many varied species of our world. And there we are, one branch of many, primate mammals, homo sapiens. This image might frighten some people because we are used to an image of a pyramid, where human beings are seen as having dominion over all of creation. This notion of dominion has contributed to the environmental crisis our world faces today, as it has been wrongly interpreted to give us permission to plunder and destroy God’s creation for our own gain. So, we are invited to instead, see ourselves as one species amongst many, part of nature, embedded in this tree of life. Uniquely loved by God; yes. Created in God’s image and likeness, yes; but also, part of a vast web of life.

The Gospel of Creation

In Chapter 2 Pope Francis reflects on the creation accounts in the book of Genesis. He emphasizes how the word “dominion” (cf. Gen 1:28), has encouraged the unbridled exploitation of nature. He notes that this *is not a correct interpretation of the Bible as understood by the Church* and we must forcefully reject the notion that our being created in God’s image and given dominion over the earth justifies absolute domination over other creatures.

“It is true that we Christians have at times incorrectly interpreted the Scriptures, nowadays we must forcefully reject the notion that our being created in God’s image and given dominion over the earth justifies absolute domination over other creatures.”

(*Laudato Si'*, 67)

The biblical texts are to be read in their **context**, with an appropriate **hermeneutic**, recognizing that they tell us to **“till and keep”** the garden of the world (cf. Gen 2:15). “Tilling” refers to cultivating, ploughing, or working, while “keeping” means **caring, protecting**, overseeing and preserving.

We need to move away from ‘Dominion’ and even ‘Stewardship’ because Stewardship gives the sense of ‘duty’. *Laudato Si'* urges us to **“CARE for Our Common Home”**.

Care taps into something deeper, passion, love. *“This implies a relationship of **mutual responsibility** between human beings and nature. Each community can take from the bounty of the earth whatever it needs for subsistence, but it also has the duty to **protect** the earth and to ensure its fruitfulness for coming generations... The Bible has no place for a tyrannical anthropocentrism (where humans are at the centre of everything) unconcerned for other creatures.”* (LS, 67). So, part of this **Communal Conversion** is that our faith communities share this vision with people. We need a new eco-spirituality, a new way of seeing the world and of interacting with the world that embraces the cosmic web of life.

The Mystery of the Universe

Laudato Si’ has beautiful passages to help us reflect on the vast mystery of the universe: “By the word of the Lord the heavens were made (Ps 33:6). Creation is the order of love; God’s **love is the fundamental moving force in all created things**. God has created **everything from nothing**, in a free act of unconditional love.

‘For you love all things that exist, and detest none of the things that you have made’ (Wisdom 11:24)

We are the first generations to have these images from space, to have the science, the physics of the workings of our universe. **The origins of life**, the unfolding of our universe, the evolution of matter from atoms to humanity. **We are living in the middle of a Paradigm shift**: New Universe Story, we are part of a 13.8-billion-year-old universe.

For people of faith, we are called to see God in all of it: **“The love which moves the sun**

and the stars.” (*Laudato Si’*, 77). This calls for a movement from a distorted view of Creation where God was seen as absent from created matter, a dualism, to seeing God in everything. To see God’s fingerprints in all of creation, the entire material universe.

Teilhard de Chardin: **Love energy was at the heart of the Big Bang.**

The Gaze of Jesus

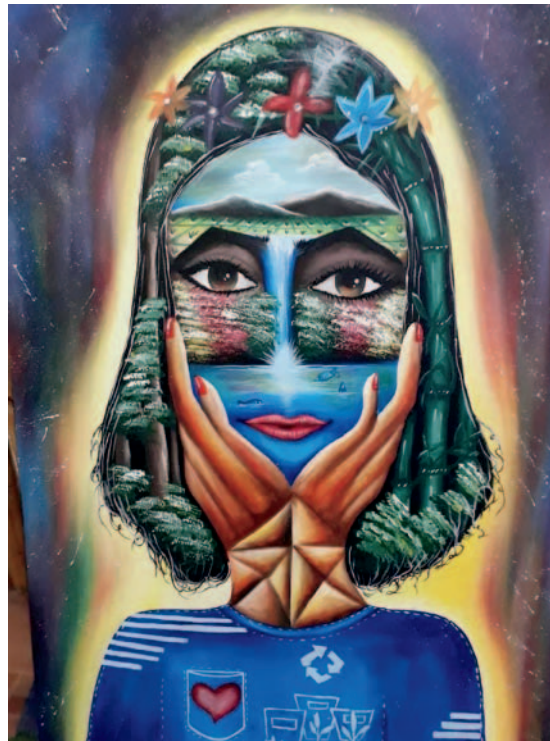
As well as putting on the spirituality of St. Francis, *Laudato Si’* urges us to look at Jesus’ relationship with nature. *“[Jesus]...was in constant touch with nature, lending it an attention full of fondness and wonder...’Lift*

up your eyes, and see how the fields are already white for harvest’ (Jn 4:35). *Jesus constantly prays outside in nature, on mountain tops, by a lake, from boats on the water. His followers were fishermen in tune with the rhythms of the seas.*

He uses nature in many parables: “The kingdom of God is like a grain of mustard seed...” (Mt 13:31-32) *The New Testament does not only tell us of the earthly Jesus and his tangible and loving relationship with the world. It also shows him risen and glorious,*

present throughout creation (Col 1:19-20). *The risen One mysteriously holds all creatures to himself and directs them towards fullness. “The very flowers of the field and the birds which his human eyes contemplated and admired are now imbued with his radiant presence”* (LS, 100)

In our liturgies, our preaching, our prayer and contemplation, are we sharing this wisdom with our faith communities?



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

Ecology of Daily Life

Communal eco conversion also involves the setting in which people live their lives – what are we surrounding ourselves with? This greatly influences the way we think, feel and act. In our rooms, our homes, our workspaces, and neighborhoods. How does our local environment affect our quality of life? Green spaces are essential for our communities, especially in urban areas and city neighborhoods where people are often surrounded by cement, asphalt, metal, and glass.

Beauty should hold a center space for our lives. Where people can gather safely, reminding us of what it means to be related to one another and to creation.

Artist

This is an image of a mural drawn by my friend and fellow climate pilgrim, Ag Sano. He describes himself as an “artist”. He wants to bring art and nature into spaces where people don’t have access to art or to nature. AG painted this mural in central Manila in the Philippines, in an underpass which runs under the chaotic busy streets of Manila. Thousands of people pass through there every day on their daily commute. It is an enormous mural stretching for hundreds of metres but bringing images of nature into spaces that are normally disconnected. *Laudato Si’* says, “Those who design buildings, neighbourhoods, public spaces and cities, ought to draw on various disciplines....” (LS, 150). We need the arts where communal conversion is concerned, poetry, art, music, storytelling, song. For as the famous phrase goes, ‘beauty will save the world’ and help us to fall in love again with the earth.

Intergenerational Justice

Must be kept to the fore as we explore communal conversion. “*What kind of world do we want to leave to generations who are coming after us? To children who are now growing up?*” **This question is at the heart of *Laudato Si’*** and it is the question that the youth climate movement is now asking the

world. *Laudato Si’* urges us to remember that all it takes is one person to make a difference. “*Doomsday predictions can no longer be met with irony or disdain. We may well be leaving to coming generations debris, desolation and filth.*”

Pope Francis met Greta Thunberg in 2019, congratulated her on her work and activism and urged her to continue. This is a short video about their meeting.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cj-Erzvblfk>

The Call of Faith Communities

“*The majority of people living on our planet profess to be believers. This should spur religions to dialogue among themselves for the sake of protecting nature, defending the poor and building networks of respect and fraternity.*” (LS, 201)

Faith communities have a huge responsibility to make this issue part of their mission, the Church’s mission, our individual missions.



Faiths for Climate Action

The Role of Religious Communities

We need an Ecological spirituality which can engage with the environmental crisis our world is facing. This ecological spirituality should not be pasted on top of an older, partly outdated theology, like icing on a cake but this ecological dimension must be at the very heart of all aspects of Christian spirituality going forward; an integral ecological spirituality which brings nourishment and Life.

If religious communities can join hands with popular 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.**

Authentic Christian faith and spirituality offers us hope, this hope gives us the **spiritual energy** which is needed to work for change even when the situation seems quite hopeless.

Communal Conversion invites us to Civil and Political Love

- St. Therese of Lisieux invites us to practise the little way of love.... Small gestures. Integral ecology of daily gestures.
- Wherever we find ourselves, we serve God and creation, with acts of kindness, love and care.
- Not all people are called to the same civic engagement, e.g. politics, but each of us are called to some sort of action in the broad civic sphere.
- *“these community actions, when they express self-giving love, can also become intense spiritual experiences.” (LS, 232)*

To come back to the climate pilgrimage

“Our physical destination is COP 24, but our real destination is the mind and hearts of all those we meet on this road.” Yeb Sano, The Climate Pilgrimage.

This is part of our call to communal conversion. The move the hearts of all those we meet on this road. In faith communities this affects how we celebrate liturgy and prayer; celebrating the Season of Creation; marking *Laudato Si’ Week*; preaching, teaching, creating spaces for the ecological spirituality and transformation to take place.

3. Conversion is ongoing

It does not stop, this journey is continuous, a journey with all of creation towards “fullness of life”.

Hope

“Hope would have us recognize that there is always a way out, that we can always redirect our steps, that we can always do something to solve our problems.” (LS, 61)

Arundathi Roy

“Another world is not only possible, she is on her way; on a query day I can even hear her breathing.”

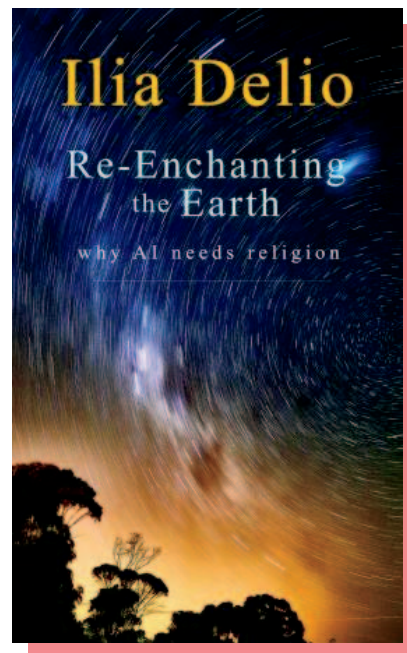
Greta Thunberg

“The one thing we need more than hope is action. Once we start to act, hope is everywhere. So instead of looking for hope, look for action. Then, and only then, hope will come.” (TEDxStockholm, 2019)

Pope Francis in *Laudato Si’*

“Let us sing as we go. May our struggles & our concern for this planet never take away the joy of our hope.” “Truly, much can be done!” (Laudato Si’, 244, 180)

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