

Care for Our Common Home – Reconnecting with the Sacred in Nature

Paul Kingsnorth, writer and poet, once dedicated activist, with a keen interest in ecological spirituality, of no religious background co-facilitated the days, with Nellie Mcloughlin, RSM. Nellie opened up Laudato Si for us. L.S. addresses the root causes of the present serious planetary degradation and human poverty. The cry of Earth and cry of the poor are one cry because all is connected. We are part of nature, not separate. Every living being, every aspect of creation is a unique expression of the divine. The letter calls us to a radical ecological conversion. How can we open ourselves to this conversion? How do we reconnect with the natural world? As a species we need to immerse ourselves in the natural world. Let earth be our teacher. In this world ‘We are not human beings on a spiritual journey. We are spiritual beings on a human journey.’ Teilhard de Chardin. We spent some guided time and some silent time in the garden. We tend to see nature with a consumer mindset and to offer a counter experience we allowed ourselves time to be present to some creature or aspect of nature admiring me. This was a challenge.

Paul led us in exploring the word ‘sacred’. Sacred in latin is ‘Sacrare’ which means ‘to separate’ to ‘set aside’, but in English the word comes from the old English word ‘halig’ meaning ‘holy’ and ‘whole’ – not split, not divided. We reflected on the way we speak about nature and the language we use. We speak about nature as if it is separate from us, outside of us. Environment, nature are ‘separate’ words. They indicate a place outside of us in which we move. There are many such words and when we pay attention to our language we discover that a lot of words do not convey our new emerging consciousness of the connectedness of everything.

Our everyday use of language when speaking about nature is also devoid of any sense of the sacredness of nature. Today’s scientific and utilitarian language does not allow space for mystery, for the sacred, for anything greater, for the holy at the depths of everything. Examples of such words are environment, climate change and biodiversity. Paul spoke of his experience some 15 years ago in West Papua where people sang to the forest, thanking it daily. This was a natural part of their lives. We can detect in our Irish language that this same awareness and ease with the sacredness of nature was once part of our consciousness and fundamental to the celtic tradition. The early Christian church incorporated the holy wells into its spirituality. St. Augustine of Canterbury advised the clergy not to destroy the pagan sanctuaries in England – namely the wells and the trees, acknowledging that they are sacred places. Over the centuries we in the west gradually came to seeing nature as separate from us, even reaching a stage of ‘criminalising’ nature. The sacred, the holy was to be confined to someplace else. Alan Watts said that he was puzzled by the fact that he only felt religious when he was in church. Paul quoted St. Bernard: *“You will find something more in woods than in books. Trees and stones will teach you that which you can never learn from masters.”* We are unlikely to abuse or destroy that to which we are intimately connected, or is part of ourselves or that we experience as sacred. *“In the west we have to learn to talk about the sacred holy thing at the centre of the wild world.”* Paul Kingsnorth

At the end of the day a very important question for all was how we live with the reality of the difficult and depressing nature of the world at present. The statistics of human deprecation and suffering and the scale of planetary destruction are overwhelming. All this factual knowledge is an emotional burden too big to carry. The implications are too enormous for us to take on. See below *The Peace of Wild Things* by Wendell Berry – ...“ I come into the peace of wild things” We feel a great grief and at the same time a great helplessness. We tend to be overwhelmed and disempowered.

So if this is the reality what makes sense, what do we do? It is essential that we acknowledge and fully accept the situation while being aware of the temptation to deny, ignore or normalise it. We acknowledge that no-one intended this to happen and the situation has been building up since the Industrial Revolution.

We need to name the grief and journey through the stages of grieving - denial, anger, bargaining, depression and finally acceptance. We need to do this ritually, as communities. Then, where from there? We need to open ourselves in receptive mode to recovering that gift of awareness - there from the dawn of human consciousness – that we are one strand in that great sacred web of connectedness that we call nature and from which in the western world we have been straying for centuries. This is the radical ecological conversion to which Francis is inviting us and reminds us that St. Francis of Assisi is the great inspiration.

The Peace of Wild Things

When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

Wendell Berry