

## The Call to Ecological Conversion

Presentation by Sydney Grail member, Tricia Gemmell.  
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Back in January I mentioned to Sarah Carbone that I was going to Portugal in July to deliver a series of five lectures on Eco-spirituality, and without hesitation she asked me if I could condense them into a half-hour talk for the parish. Although I felt daunted by the idea, I could not pass up such an opportunity to talk about something I feel so passionate about and which I feel is so integral to our Christian vocation. I am going to Portugal because I am a member of the International Grail movement, and the Portuguese Grail have invited me as part of their annual week-long summer school on "Women, Mystics and Spirituality". Now, if I were to explain to you what the Grail is I would have no time left for my talk, so I won't, but I encourage you to look us up at [www.grailaustralia.org.au](http://www.grailaustralia.org.au) and see for yourselves.

Once I had written my five lectures I was able to give them a name, and I called them "The Call to Ecological Conversion," because that is so obviously what we are all being called to at the present moment in time. Where did I first experience this call myself? I was studying on-line for a Masters in Theology and the opportunity came up for a face-to-face course on Ecology, Cosmology and Spirituality...that meant a lecturer, people, discussions...of course I took it! And the lecturer just happened to be Denis Edwards, a world authority on ecological theology, a prolific writer, and a wonderful teacher. I have heard it said he was one of Francis' advisers on *Laudato Si*. Since that course in 2012 it would be true to say that I have been slowly trying to embrace the way of ecological conversion. It's not something that happens overnight. It's not possible to overturn the lifestyle of a lifetime. But it IS possible to change and you just have to do your best to allow that change to happen. And if you have no idea what I am talking about when I use the words "ecological conversion" then I hope you will by the time I am finished.

What I am going to do tonight is give you a very condensed version of what I will be presenting in Portugal in July. I start with some definitions of ecological spirituality (or eco-spirituality as it is often called). As with any spirituality, it finds expression in the totality of one's lifestyle. Broadly speaking, it is based in a belief in the sacredness of the entire created universe, in the Divine Mystery being not only the source of all creation but also the sustaining power within it, and in the belief of the interconnectedness of all life. It is about living a life that seeks to care for the earth, that engages with the environmental crises of our time and place, and that longs for and works for justice for all creatures. And it is marked by attitudes of reverence, wonder and gratitude. It is a spirituality that heeds the call to ecological conversion within the Christian vocation.

But where is this call coming from? Long before *Laudato Si* there were prophetic voices in the wilderness warning us that we needed to re-assess the ways in which we were treating nature – I am thinking here of Rachel Carson and Thomas Berry, no doubt you can think of others – and today those voices are all around us, painting a bleak picture of what humanity has done to the earth. We are facing something that humanity has never had to face before, with the effects of what we have done threatening to destroy the human race itself. Even Leonardo di Caprio said as much in his acceptance speech at the Oscars this year. Pope Francis devotes Chapter One of his encyclical to looking at how bad things are and he concludes:

But we need only take a frank look at the facts to see that our common home is falling into serious disrepair. 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. Still, we can see signs that things are now reaching a breaking point...There are regions now at high risk and, aside from all doomsday predictions, the present world system is certainly unsustainable from a number of points of view... "If we scan the regions of our planet, we immediately see that humanity has disappointed God's expectations" (61).

It is this knowledge of what theologian Elizabeth Johnson calls our "deep moral failure" that is one of the driving forces behind ecological theology. It is certainly true that all the work of the eco-theologians is marked by horror at the degradation of the natural world at our hands and equally by a sense of urgency that we need to act quickly to avert disaster. Francis himself repeatedly uses the word "urgent" in *Laudato Si*. That the Pope, the leader of the Catholic Church, has written an encyclical addressed to the whole world on the urgency of ecological conversion is nothing less than amazing. It truly is a game changer in the world sphere. Pope Francis has brought ecology from the margins into the mainstream. Catholics, at least, can no longer say that this is not a grave moral issue. It is, in fact, being presented as the most pressing moral issue of our times.

There is another driving force also deeply at work in eco-theology. We call it the Universe Story and science has been delivering it to us over the last 150 years. It is the story of cosmogenesis, i.e. the creation of the cosmos, that began with the great flaring forth that scientists unimaginatively call the Big Bang and which continues to this very day, some 13.7 billion years later. It's a story which many of us have seen glimpses of on our television screens, in documentaries by Carl Sagan, Brian Cox and David Attenborough, among others. Do you have any idea how important this story is? In 1992, Brian Swimme, a cosmologist, and Thomas Berry, a cultural historian and theologian, co-wrote a ground-breaking book. It was called *The Universe Story: From the Primordial Flaring Forth to the Ecozoic Era--A Celebration of the Unfolding of the Cosmos*. Not only did they tell the scientific story of cosmogenesis; they interpreted it theologically. Let me give you a flavour of their work by quoting some of the things they say:

Cosmogenesis is organised by communion...Alienation for a particle is a physical impossibility...Nothing is itself without everything else (77).

...there was never a time in 4 billion years of Earth's life with as many species as there were when the humans first arose in Earth's community...Perhaps the only word to describe the world that gave birth to the human form of life is paradise (140).

To preserve the natural world as the primary revelation of the divine must be the basic concern of religion (243).

Both a competence and a willingness to engage in the immense effort needed to tell the story is what is now needed, especially if this story is to become what it should be: the comprehensive context of our human understanding of ourselves (237).

Well, theologians heard what Swimme and Berry were saying and they began to tell the story. This was where eco-theology began in earnest. Thomas Berry, in his truly prophetic

book, *The Dream of the Earth*, written in 1988, gave this as his ultimate analysis of the Universe Story:

Although as yet unrealized, this scientific account of the universe is the greatest religious, moral, and spiritual event that has taken place in these centuries. It is the supreme humanistic and spiritual as well as the supreme scientific event. The sublime mission of modern education is to reveal the true importance of the story for the total range of human and earthly affairs (98).

I can hear you still wondering what is so special about this story. What is special is that it belongs to all of us, the whole human race. It tells us that we have a common origin and destiny and that we are related to everything else in the universe, across time and space. It is capable of entrancing us with the wonder of creation. It is a story that could replace the thousands of creation myths in existence to become the new “creation myth” for the whole world, thus uniting us in a common understanding and leading us toward a new consciousness about ourselves and our place on earth.

Right. That was my first lecture. In my second lecture, I reflected on the fact that these two stories, both individually and together, have been changing people’s perceptions across the world, for a number of decades now, leading to movements and organizations devoted to promoting sustainable development and lifestyles and the continuation of a rich bio-diversity on the planet. There are many groups you could join tomorrow to make a difference. In this context, you might ask yourself the question, “Why do we need ecological theology?”

I believe that eco-theology matters, for two reasons. First, I believe Christian theology has a moral responsibility to make amends for a past that has not served the earth well. Our focus on sinful humanity and our preoccupation with the next world have both taken our gaze away from the earth as a serious theological concern. Paul Collins, an Australian theologian, goes so far as to say that “throughout its history Christianity has injected a negative approach to the natural world into its theology” (Collins 1995, 96). Thomas Berry is even more critical: “The greatest failure of Christianity,” he says, “in the total course of its history is its inability to deal with the devastation of the planet” (Collins 1995, 152).

Second and more importantly, Christianity has something positive to offer. In one sense, this “something positive” is timeless, is what Christianity has always offered: the hope of conversion and personal transformation through Jesus Christ, only today the conversion is an ecological one, personal transformation is transformation into someone who lives simply and treads lightly upon this earth, and new lights are shone upon the person and meaning of Jesus. However, it is also the case, I think, that for people of faith the *theological* understanding of why we should seriously turn our attention to the earth has significant power to change us. And I also suspect that for some, it is *only* a theological understanding that will truly change them. It is certainly my own experience that new theological insights have radically changed me. And that is why we need eco-theology.

I find eco-theology exciting. It is filled with a sense of urgency, an awareness that we are at a crucial juncture in history. Unless we change and change radically, we will destroy the earth as we know it and ourselves along with it. Eco-theology is ground-breaking, it is

certainly challenging and sometimes conceptually difficult, but it is always fresh and new. It registers wonder, mystery and awe and invites the reader (or listener) to enter the mystery and be transformed.

My second lecture is about the resources that Christianity can offer us to reshape our consciousness about the earth. Chapter 2 of *Laudato Si* takes the same theme and it's a wonderful chapter. Eco-theologians are well aware that Christianity has to bear its share of the blame for the current state of the world. This partly arose out of misinterpretation of the creation stories in Genesis 1 and 2, and Francis takes care to correct this in his encyclical. However, much more significant, I think, was the way in which Western Christianity developed after the Reformation, and nature became largely forgotten.

I don't have time tonight to dwell at any length on the many treasures that we have in our Catholic faith tradition to open our eyes and minds and hearts to realities we have neglected. What I will do is tell you where to find some of them. Let's start with Scripture. Read the psalms, but most particularly read Psalm 104. Read any of the Wisdom literature, but most particularly Job 38-41. In the words of Elizabeth Johnson, "its theological vision offers a strong antidote to the human arrogance that has flowed in the modern era from the view of dominion as domination" (2014, 269). It is an amazing piece of writing that highlights the otherness of God and of God's creatures, and puts Job firmly in his place, which is not the centre of everything, but next to everything else. God's voice speaks in the whirlwind in delight at the natural world, where each creature is loved for its own sake, and we should take this as an invitation to share God's delight and love.

Of course, the life of Jesus of Nazareth in the gospels has much to teach us as well. In *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis devotes 5 paragraphs to "the gaze of Jesus," to show us what we can learn from him – paragraphs 96-100. Denis Edwards has written about ecology from just about every theological perspective there is, so it is not surprising he has written a book called *Jesus and the Natural World*. In this book, he writes, "The importance of the natural world to Jesus can be glimpsed in two aspects of his life and ministry: his preaching of the kingdom of God in parables taken from the natural world and his prayer to God outside" (Edwards 2012, 27). With respect to the parables, he considers they "are the work of one who sees the natural world as the gift of God and as the place of divine presence" (Edwards 2012, 28). I will leave it to you to go back to the gospels and discover this for yourselves. And when you do, see how often Jesus prays in the open air, starting with his temptation in the wilderness for 40 days and finishing in the garden of Gethsemane. We could learn much from Jesus' relationship with creation, as well as what he says about it. Listen to these words, for example:

Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them...Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these...Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. (Mt 6: 26, 28-9; 10: 29)

How much do we let the natural world speak to us of God?

Are you aware that there has been consistent Catholic teaching on ecology for the past 25 years? Here is another resource for our ecological education. Our Pope Francis' recent encyclical has not sprung out of nowhere, but has a solid foundation in recent Church teaching. On 1<sup>st</sup> January 1990 John Paul II issued a document for the World Day of Peace, entitled "Peace with God the Creator; Peace with all of Creation", which he began by saying that "a new ecological awareness is beginning to emerge which, rather than being downplayed, ought to be encouraged to develop into concrete programmes and initiatives." In various encyclicals and documents he spoke out against environmental destruction and encouraged ecological conversion. Benedict XVI took a similar approach and it is well worth reading his World Day of Peace Message in 2010, "If You Want to Cultivate Peace, Protect Creation."

And finally, there is the great treasure of the Franciscan heritage, by which I mean the life of St Francis of Assisi as a model for us to follow, as well as the theological works of St Bonaventure and Duns Scotus, works which have been so important for the development of contemporary ecological thinking. If this is something you would like to explore, I recommend this book, *Care for Creation (a franciscan spirituality of the earth)* by Ilia Delio, Keith Douglass Warner and Pamela Wood. Of course, you can read about St Francis in *Laudato Si* as well.

My third lecture focuses on the doctrine of God as it is being rewritten by eco-theologians. Denis Edwards has said that "the most important theological foundation for an ecological praxis is to be found in the doctrine of God"(1998-9, 126). What that means is that what we believe about God has a profound influence on the way we act and so it is important that our theology gives us a proper foundation for caring about the earth. What the eco-theologians in the main have done is to take the Universe Story as their goldmine, if you like, and mined it for theological insight. In doing so, they have drawn on Scripture and theology for their interpretive frameworks. The doctrine of God often makes for difficult reading, and there is no way I can do it justice in just a few minutes, so I am not even going to try, but I do recommend you read about it yourselves. One of the best and most readable of recent works is Elizabeth Johnson's *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love*, which she intends as a dialogue between Darwin and the Nicene Creed. Other books I can recommend: anything by Denis Edwards, but particularly *Ecology at the Heart of Faith: The Change of Heart that Leads To a New Way of Living on Earth* and *Jesus and the Natural World: Exploring a Christian Approach to Ecology*. I would also recommend Diarmuid O'Murchu's *Evolutionary Faith* if you want something that reads like poetry as well as theology. However, if you just want a basic introduction to the subject, read Paul Collins' *God's Earth: Religion as if matter really mattered*.

Now I really don't have time to talk about my fourth lecture either, which looked at women's theological voices in particular. I will just mention Sallie McFague, an American, a theologian all her life and now in her eighties. Anything she writes is well worth reading. In her latest book, published in 2013, *Blessed Are the Consumers: Climate Change and the Practice of Restraint*, she brings a lifetime of theology and experience to bear on the mess we find ourselves in. It is not an easy read, but one of the most challenging theological works I have read in a long time. She is adamant that conversion begins by embracing voluntary poverty as a wild space. She says that it

...allows us to see *differently*, to imagine other possibilities, to pay attention to others...It is a movement that most religions find to be essential to change, real deep change, change of mind and behaviour. Many call it "conversion." It is the beginning of a long process of discipline, patience, and self-emptying that allows us to recognize that something outside of ourselves is real and has needs. (85-6)

My final lecture focuses on eco-spirituality, which I define as all those intentional practices we employ in order to achieve that shift in consciousness required for ecological conversion. All the eco-theologians ask this radical shift of us. Pope Francis demands it of us too. Very early on in the encyclical, he says, "Our goal is not to amass information or to satisfy curiosity, but rather 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" (19). You will note that Francis' starting point is what is happening to our common home and his end point or goal is that we do something about it. But look at how we are to get there. We are to *dare* to make the suffering of the world our *own* suffering. If that is not a radical shift in our consciousness, I don't know what is.

Francis does point the way. Read Chapter 6 of *Laudato Si*. If it speaks to you, you will want to spend the rest of your life listening to it. He tells us we must change our lifestyle, resist consumerism, cultivate a disinterested concern for others, reject self-centredness and self-absorption, and assess the impact of everything we do on the world around us. We must overcome our individualism and develop new habits of living. But he realises that none of this is possible without a profound inner conversion. All the eco-theologians would agree with him. Furthermore, they all speak of the need to develop a contemplative consciousness. Denis Edwards puts it this way:

An authentic ecological spirituality will involve a rediscovery of mysticism. In the way it is used here, the word mysticism refers to personal union with God in prayer. In this sense, all Christians are called to be mystics. Ecological mysticism, then, means finding the incomprehensible mystery of God in the boundless beauty of the natural world as well as in its strangeness and otherness. It will be a mysticism that involves an enduring, lifelong commitment to the good of Earth. It will be a mysticism that gives rise to action. The way of wisdom is not only a way of seeing, and not only the discovery of a new capacity of feeling for non-human creation, but both of these issuing forth in personal, political and ecclesial action (Edwards 2012, 67).

Meditation is a spiritual practice highly recommended by eco-theologians. I can recommend it too from personal experience, and we are very lucky to be living in a community where there are numerous Christian meditation groups around us. Some of you will be familiar with Donna Mulhearn, a well-known peace activist who now lives in the Blue Mountains. She recently wrote this: "In light of the ecological crisis the world faces, meditation is generally not rated high on the list of responses. But maybe it should be." She goes on to testify that daily meditation over time results in a shift in consciousness which results in a greater connection to the earth community, and concludes that "through this sense of connection, and the work of paying attention, meditation can be the catalyst for ecological conversion and provide energy for ongoing, sustainable action for the

environment” (<http://www.goodsams.org.au/good-oil/meditation-a-catalyst-for-ecological-conversion-and-action/>).

How do we turn our lives around? We must start with profound inner conversion, but at a certain point we can no longer do much as individuals. That is why Francis says that “the ecological conversion needed to bring about lasting change is also a community conversion” (219). And this is where the potential power of church community comes in. It seems to me that every parish should have groups of people meeting to tease all these questions out, to learn and to keep learning, and to sustain one another in communal action. Francis tells us that “a great cultural, spiritual and educational challenge stands before us, and it will demand that we set out on the long path of renewal” (202). To be in it for the long haul we have to be in it with each other. What am I thinking about here in concrete terms? Well, let’s start with the parish: making our liturgies reflect more of our love of creation and our sense of communion with it; making our community events eco-friendly; teaching the Universe Story in our schools; creating ways of on-going learning; learning how to resist the temptations of over consumption and consumerism; discussing and implementing the ecological use of our homes, our schools, our churches, our local businesses; building networks regionally, nationally and internationally. I’m thinking big here, but it always starts with just a few people coming together.

Unfortunately, Elizabeth Johnson is right when she remarks that

it is mostly true that the Christian churches both in their institutions and members do not face this crisis with the energy they pour out on other matters...the plight of the natural world is not high on the agenda of the majority of Christian believers. Conversion to the earth is of secondary importance, if it is considered at all. It is as if the Earth were undergoing its agony in the garden, about to be crucified, and we, the disciples of Jesus, are curled up asleep (260-1).

Of course, it doesn’t have to be true of us. But it is at the moment. I hope I have given you a few things to think about tonight. I hope you will be inspired to take up the challenge of ecological conversion. And I would like to leave you with these inspiring words of Elizabeth Johnson, right at the end of *Ask the Beasts*.

A flourishing humanity on a thriving planet rich in species in an evolving universe, all together filled with the glory of God: such is the vision that must guide us at this critical time of Earth’s distress, to practical and critical effect. Ignoring this view keeps people of faith and their churches locked into irrelevance while a terrible drama of life and death is being played out in the real world. By contrast, living the ecological vocation in the power of the Spirit sets us off on a great adventure of mind and heart, expanding the repertoire of our love (Johnson 2014, 286).

## References

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Francis, *Laudato Si'*.

Johnson, Elizabeth 2014, *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love*, Bloomsbury, London.

McFague, Sallie 2013, *Blessed Are the Consumers: Climate Change and the Practice of Restraint*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis.

### **Other Recommended Reading**

Berry, Thomas 1990, *The Dream of the Earth*.

Collins, Paul 1995, *God's Earth: Religion as if matter really mattered*.

Delio, Ilia, Warner, Keith Douglas and Wood, Pamela 2008, *Care for Creation (a franciscan spirituality of the earth)*.

Edwards, Denis, *Ecology at the Heart of Faith: The Change of Heart that Leads To a New Way of Living on Earth*.

Edwards, Denis, *Jesus and the Natural World: Exploring a Christian Approach to Ecology*.

O'Murchu, Diarmuid, *Evolutionary Faith: Rediscovering God in Our Great Story*.

### **Faith-based ecology groups in Sydney**

Faith Ecology Network – an initiative of the Columban Mission Institute – see [www.faithecolony.net.au](http://www.faithecolony.net.au)

Australian Religious Response to Climate Change – see [www.arrcc.org.au](http://www.arrcc.org.au)