



**Seán McDonagh**, Columban priest and ecologist, is an outspoken critic of the degradation of the environment, linking this to global poverty and the increased suffering of the poor. His understanding of environmental issues and the relationship between faith, justice and ecology was awakened during his work with the indigenous T'boli people on the Philippine island of Mindanao in the 1970s and 1980s. He strongly urges the Catholic Church to undergo an 'ecological conversion' advocating that environmental justice must be a core Christian activity. He was Chair of Greenpeace Ireland in the 1990s. He has been instrumental in offering a master's degree in ecology and faith at the Columban Centre in Dalgan Park, County Meath.

He is the author of numerous articles and nine books including *Climate Change: The Challenge to All of Us*; *Greening the Christian Millennium*; *Care for the Earth*; and *Dying for Water*.

***Your background as Chair of Greenpeace Ireland and your long struggle to bring ecological awareness to the Catholic world has been admired by many in the Green movement. The transformation to ecological awareness for you began in the Philippines in the seventies when you had awakening to the life of the rainforest and loss of biodiversity.***

In 1978 I was teaching anthropology in the University of Mindanao in the Philippines and one of my students was doing ethnography on the T'boli people. I agreed to go with her and work with her in the summer, and I stayed for six weeks. The rainforest was an extraordinary place and the diversity of species was amazing. I knew nothing of ecology at the time but I realised I had seen logs coming down the river but I had had no idea of the impact the destruction of the forest was having up-river and the knock-on effect on the people and their livelihoods. When I was leaving the Bishop asked me to set up a mission there, and so I did.

To get to the mission you had to travel by bus and then walk for several hours. No electricity so I worked during daylight, only at first, but I eventually got a generator. I had a wonderful group of helpers – five Filipina sisters, one a nurse. The first thing we did, we started with infant mortality. We looked at why were people dying from water borne disease, and got clean water and sewage. We also looked at how their diet had changed from fruit and tubers to grains under modernisation, and encouraged backyard gardening. The fundamental focus was that human well-being depends on planetary health. We always matched their own culture as much as possible. I spent fifteen years there concentrating on the well-being of the people and the environment. I would have love to just be an anthropologist, huge changes were taking place but more important was the health and well-being of the people and land. One of the things that happened was that the population began to increase. So I wrote a chapter in the greening of the church and I gave examples of all I had done. I was critical of *Humanae Vitae* but I kept within the fold; but I had difficulties with the Filipino bishops, even some friends, over my attitude to sustainable population.

I began to read about ecology and, on my way home to Ireland in 1980, I went through New York and met Thomas Berry, the Passionist priest and philosopher who had written about

the creation. Tom was an early advocate for the environment and its intrinsic value, not just its usefulness to humans. I talked to him about the rainforest people and what I was seeing, feeling fearful. Tom told me to come at 9:30 and we talked for hour and one o clock came and he said lets go across to the dining room and carry on, this is important. I said I would love to spend a week with him, and he said you need to be here at least four months and so I got permission for this while I was back in Ireland, and I had to send a telegram to my base that I would not be back for five months.

Tom Berry had an amazing breadth of vision, he was disappointed that the church had become so exclusively bound up with the well-being of the humanity the exclusion of all other life forms, and so in theology there was nothing you could turn to. I got a great foundation from Tom Berry. He started me off with Descartes, which he said was where the greatest disconnect of the western mind came from. Descartes has said we must be lords and masters of nature, that is the goal. Now we have a mechanised world; the biological world the world of living organisms faded into the background for us just to be used as we want, of course the intent was for the betterment of humanity but we have caused the destruction of the earth and that is not for the betterment of humanity. I don't think you can understand the destruction of life and climate change unless you understand what happened during the enlightenment. The good and the not so good. We went right through Marx, right through modern philosophers and Tom gave me 150 books to take back to the Philippines and asked me to write of my experience there.

#### ***Your first book to care for the earth was a seminal work***

I gave a talk in 1982 in Trinity, and Sean Frayne and Enda Mc Donagh said you have to write about this so I wrote for *The Universe*, the weekly journal. When the editor got it he asked me if I had sent it to the right journal, did I mean to send it to the *Farmers Journal*? So Enda intervened and got it published. The same thing happened when I wrote *To Care for the Earth* in 1984. I got twenty-three refusals and they said it was of interest but not our cup of tea, and so eventually Enda wrote to Chapman saying this is important and the book was published in 1985. *The God of Creation* was published around the same time when the Green ideas were taking off.

The people who started the interest in ecology and faith were the World Council of Churches. Liberation theology in South American in the 1960s became interested in water and so on, and then by the early 1980s the World Council of Churches spoke on creation. I was more accepted in Geneva than in Rome, and I wasn't the only one. In 1988 *What Is Happening to Our Beautiful Land* was published to silence from Rome. I was suspect on population and critical of the church, so I decided that some education was needed.

The book on Catholic social teaching for *Compendium* in 2004 had half a paragraph on climate change and was not very serious, and half a paragraph on biodiversity; so the movement between that and *Laudato Si'* is tremendous. There is a huge revolution in ideas, for example, the interpretation of Genesis Chapter 1 on the conquest of the earth dominion is a wrong interpretation of Genesis. Christians must realise the duty towards nature is importance (64). Human life is grounded in three fundamental relationships, with God; with our neighbour; and with the earth. Environmental destruction acts are not just bad but are

sinful. We are now being asked about the intrinsic value of other species; the life of prayer arising from the appreciation of creation.

***What was your own involvement in Laudato Si'?***

In November 2013 I wrote an article on ecology for *The Universal Catholic* publication weekly and shortly afterwards I got a call from Cardinal Turkson, who told me that he wanted someone to draw up something on the basic connections between justice and the creation. I said to him are you aware that your predecessor Cardinal Moncino had a fractious relationship with myself over climate change over two decades? (In 2007 Moncino ran a Vatican conference on climate change and brought over six climate sceptics from the USA.) He said he was aware of that. Turkson is a good guy, we got on really well but he wasn't into the issues at first, but during the process he got really involved and we produced a good basic document. The process was that I worked on the document with Professor Sweeney, and it went back and forth and we updated it in the light of critical responses. Donal Dorr also gave it a critical response. Around Easter last year I got a summary I liked and Turkman was pleased with it; I was delighted with the quality of time that he gave to it when he gave it to the Pontifical Conference, where he stayed the for the whole presentation. So then it moved on to the next stage, on to the Secretary of State and I did not see it again after it left the Pontifical Council but I can recognise some of my input.

There are groups within the church who see biodiversity as selling out. For example when I try to protect species we get the response, human life is the issue not habitat protection; they don't get that you can't protect human life without protecting planetary habitats, climate change is teaching us that if nothing else. They think we need eighty-five thousand hectares of rainforest for agriculture to feed people, they don't get that the land will wash away without the trees and they are opposed to the concept of sustainable population. I think these issues are back on the table and in my recent book which is a commentary on *Laudato Si'* I go back to that.

*Laudato Si'* is ecumenical; it is addressed to all not just Catholics, the Pope is saying this is what we have done to the world – we have desecrated creation we have to change our ways. Pope Francis has a background in pastoral care from Buenos Aires and would have been aware of the problems of biodiversity as far back as 2007 from the Conference in Latin America in Aparecida, Brazil, where there was very good input from the bishops of the Amazon. When Francis read the draft he already knew the problem and recognised its seriousness.

Now I wasn't totally happy with his understanding of evolution of the universe, I think Tom Berry's view would have tied us in better. I have written about that in my new book. *Laudato Si'* is not perfect – he got few things wrong; mangrove forests are not mangrove swamps and the reference to virgin forests and so on – but it's a great step forward. What I want the church to do on the basis of this, is to run Synods over three or four years – the first year on *Laudato Si'* on biodiversity, then on climate change and how we can mitigate it. Also the problem with carbon-based farming, we need to uneducate the leadership of the church, I know at senior level the church they don't understand the science and they get lost and embarrassed, and retreat from the discussion. We need to educate people in ecology and faith.

During 1984 in the Philippines I did two days on ecology and the response from pastors was that ecology is a middle class preoccupation and we need to help the poor; but I told them of how the poor were the ones who suffered from environmental degradation. I know those guys, one in particular, made a huge transformation, but not huge enough. I have been disappointed with the attitude of the church, focussed on the human to the exclusion of everything, but justice and ecology go together. According to Tom Berry the church lost interest in the natural world after the Black Death. Francis of Assisi tried to recover a spirituality of creation, but the church in Europe turned away from the natural world and did not recover for 300 years. The attitude was this world is not of interest so look after your soul. This was not changed and was even exaggerated by the reformation.

In the 1990s I met John Feehan, an amazing ecologist who also knows the tradition, both Greek and Latin. We started masters degree in Ecology and Faith in Dalgan Park in collaboration with the University of Wales. John taught two extraordinary courses, the clearest and most competent commentary on the relationship between science and religion; we also ran summer schools in the Burren. We were in a situation that our first communion prayer teaches us to despise the things of the earth and we needed to change that sort of thinking. John has written extensively on ecology; *Farming in Ireland* (2003) is an extraordinary book, not well accepted in the farming community, about petrochemical farming having no long term future. Also a book on the wildflowers of Offaly. And a wonderful book, *The Singing Heart of the World* (2012).

Our masters degree is now in association with All Hallows and we also have theologian and ecologist Anne Primavesi and Catriona Russell of Trinity College with us. Mary T Malone, the scholar and theologian, has also worked with us on feminism and the negativity towards women in the church.

### ***What is your experience with Islam in the Philippines?***

Mindanao in a predominantly Muslim area of the Philippines and part of our work was ecumenical dialogue, so I got to know a lot of Muslims in that part of the world. Islam was spread in Indonesia and the Philippines by the Sufi tradition, which is hugely sacramental and open to other traditions as is the Shia tradition.

Sunni is more focussed on rules, and what is central is that anything that is taken away from the Almighty is wrong, which is not the case with the Shia tradition. The Wahhabi tradition within Sunni Islam is extreme, they hate music and art. Christianity is not their focus, it is Shia Islam that they hate. They also hate the Saudis as lax and luxury loving. Wahhabism has destroyed Islam in the Philippines and worldwide. It is not Islam that is creating radical Islam, but Wahhabism.

There is quite a lot of ways to counter this; it is to have the wisdom tradition evolution. We need to deal with current scientific realities and not compartmentalise our religion in a schizophrenic way; this applies to Muslim as well as Christians. We have to take God's creation seriously, period. We are learning more and more about creation and how vast and

wonderful it is; it is not a small creation limited in time and space, it is a magnificent revelation and that is the path we walk right now on this earth with other species.