

The Congregatio Jesu - Ecology and Charism

Introduction

The present ecological crisis¹ looming over Planet Earth is so grave and so complex that we find it difficult as religious to respond adequately. We can say this is a problem for the politicians and the economists to solve, whilst we focus on our spiritual apostolate; or we busy ourselves doing things (re-cycling waste, cultivating food locally, not using plastic bags, saving water) and so on, all of which are excellent and exemplary – but not enough. Some respond to the crisis by being paralysed by the gravity and enormity of it all, or simply move into denial. Others hope that once again the market economy will find technical solutions. The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius can help us not only to see the ecological crisis within its wider spiritual context, they also present a way of dealing with what is ‘disordered’ in our lives and can, with our cooperation, convert us to live our lives as intended by God our Creator. This paper seeks to present a way forward for the Congregatio Jesu in developing a spiritual response to the present ecological crisis.²

Threefold Relationships

The 1999 Jesuit document on ecology *We Live in a Broken World* speaks about “a threefold relationship of subjects” between God, humans and the rest of Creation³. We cannot be in right relationship with one if we are not in right relationship with all. This was stressed by Fr Kolvenbach at a talk given in Zimbabwe the year before. He stated that these relationships are “so closely united that a person cannot find God unless he finds him through the environment and, conversely, that his relationship with the environment will be out of balance unless he also relates to God.”⁴

The use of the term “subjects” is important. The Western model of development tends to see ‘the rest of creation’ as objects, not subjects, and assumes that human beings are radically different from other creatures. Once this model enters our thinking we objectify the natural world and see it as there for our use or abuse. But in the Book of Genesis we read that God gave the earth to man ‘to till it and care for it’ (Gen.2:15), and St Paul reminds us in his letter to the Ephesians that ‘when the times had run their course...he would bring everything together under Christ, as head, everything in the heavens and everything on earth’ (Eph.1:10).

Eco-Spirituality and the Spiritual Exercises

This ‘threefold relationship of subjects’ is particularly evident in the *Principle and Foundation* and in the *Contemplation of Love*, the opening and the ending of the Spiritual Exercises. At a first glance the language of the *Principle and Foundation* might sound anthropocentric: ‘other things on the face of the earth are created for man...and he is to use them as much as they help him on to his end....’(Sp.Exx 23). However, we need to remember that creation is the place of salvation, and not just the background, our task then is to ‘show reverence for all the gifts of creation. By collaborating with God in using creation in a right relationship we act as good stewards in our care for God’s world and its development.’⁵

The *Contemplatio* clarifies that Creation is both a source of God and a pathway to God. The activity of God and the mystery of God are in Creation, and God dwells in all Creation. As

¹ The word crisis is used here in the original Greek sense to mean ‘decision moment’

² This paper acknowledges its indebtedness to an article by Jim Profit SJ ‘Spiritual Exercises and Ecology’ *Promotio Iustitiae* No 82 2004/1 (Rome) Society of Jesus.

³ ‘We Live in a Broken World’ *Promotio Iustitiae* 70 (1999), 21

⁴ Peter-Hans Kolvenbach “Our Responsibility for God’s Creation” address at the opening of Arrupe College, Harare, August 22nd 1998.

⁵ David L.Fleming SJ ‘Draw me into your Friendship: the Spiritual Exercises’ (1996) Institute of Jesuit Source s.

the Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins puts it: *'the world is charged with the grandeur of God.'*⁶ We experience the goodness of God through the creatures around us. When we experience this goodness, we spontaneously want to 'praise, reverence and serve God'.

The coherence of an Ignatian spirituality of creation is evident also in the Third Rule of Discernment. Here Ignatius repeats that we cannot have knowledge of God apart from the created world. Referring to 'Spiritual Consolation' he writes: 'this term describes our interior life....when we find that we can freely give ourselves over to God and there is no competition with any human person or any created thing. Rather, we begin to see everything and everyone in the context of God, the Creator and Giver of all good gifts.' (Sp.Exx 316). This is the Ignatian worldview.

Differing Worldviews

The ecological crisis is brought about by a different worldview. This is the worldview of consumerism with its myth of endless material progress and economic growth. By trying to control nature we are creating havoc with the natural world as seas turn acidic, deserts expand, glaciers melt, biodiversity is impoverished, forests (the lungs of the planet) are destroyed, and our fossil fuel emissions heat up the atmosphere to dangerous levels. In the end, natural sources are limited. There is only one Planet Earth, and as we know the speed at which we are exhausting these resources means that we need at least two Earths – if not three. The ecological crisis is due to a disorder in the three-fold relationship referred to previously. God, humans, and the rest of Creation are out of harmony. As David Toolan states, 'to degrade the earth is to interfere with the message of the creator.'⁷

What at first glance looks like a scientific and economic problem for humankind is in fact a spiritual problem. Even the scientists acknowledge this. The British scientist John Houghton writes: 'Not having the will is a spiritual problem, not a scientific problem.'⁸ And to quote Fr Kolvenbach in his Harare talk again: 'at the origins of the ecological crisis is denial – in deed more than in word – of the relationship with God....when we are cut off from God, then we permit ourselves to destroy life, and ecologically speaking, the conditions of life.' Pope John Paul II took up this theme when he called for 'ecological conversion'. He said: 'Humanity has disappointed divine expectations....humiliating....that flowerbed that is our dwelling. It is necessary therefore to stimulate and sustain ecological conversion.'⁹

The Weeks of the Exercises

In the first week of the Exercises we focus on sin, what is 'disordered' in our lives. And rather than despair of our sin – and the sin of society, we take it in prayer to the Lord. Like the Prodigal Son (Luke 15: 11-32) we hear the call to come home, to return to God, to the Earth he has given us, with repentance for squandering our inheritance through our violence in exploiting his gifts. The second exercise of the week ends with: 'an exclamation of wonder with deep feeling, going through all creatures, how they have left me in life and preserved me in it.....the heavens, sun, moon, stars, and elements, fruits, birds, fishes and animals and the earth....'(Sp. Exx.60)

In the second week of the Exercises we approach Creation as a contemplative, and experience the richness of the earth with all our senses. We can also seek intimacy with the Cosmic Christ which finds its fullest expression in the incarnation. In the third week we get in touch with the suffering of Christ within Creation. The Cosmic Christ who continues to suffer in the poor and needy, cries for all and suffers for all of us on the cross. We ask for a sense of shame and compassion for what we have done. In the fourth week we experience

⁶ G.M.Hopkins 'God's Grandeur'.

⁷ David Toolan, *At Home with the Cosmos* (Maryknoll, NY, 2001) 74.

⁸ Public Lecture given by John Houghton at University of St Michael's Toronto, June 2002

⁹ Pope John Paul II, General Audience, January 17, 2001.

the new life of Christ bursting forth and coming to find us in the garden. The Exercises conclude with the *Contemplatio* for achieving love made possible by the reconciliation of all our three-fold relationships.

Mary Ward and Ecology

Mary Ward lived long before the present ecological crisis began, long before the market economy began to drive our desires for consumer goods, and long before a Spirituality of Creation had been developed. However, she was nourished on the Spiritual Exercises and had access to the Ignatian Constitutions. We can catch occasional glimpses of her understanding of the three-fold relationship referred to earlier in this paper. She wrote on one occasion: *'Give yourself entirely to your Creator, and lend yourself only, so to speak, to creatures.'* The language is Ignatian. When she traveled we know from the 'Briefe Relation' that she enjoyed nature: *'if occasion of rokes (rocks), falling of waters and other things high Pine trees, Meddowes, or pleasant Brookes, she wou'd dilate (fill) herselfe in admiration of God Almighty his Power, Providence, Wisdome, and goodness.'*¹⁰ Her love of nature echoes that of St Ignatius who from the balcony beside his bedroom would gaze at the stars at night, taking great delight. Both saw creation not simply as God's gift, but through it, God's presence in Creation.

God our Creator and Lord

The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus, and now too, our Constitutions are a continuation of the spiritual insights we find in the Exercises. Even Ignatius' way of addressing God shows the influence of these experiences from the Exercises. On fourteen separate occasions in the Constitutions God is referred to as 'Creator' and frequently as 'our Creator and Lord.'¹¹ A beautiful example of this comes in C.288: "They should often be exhorted to seek God our Lord in all things, removing from themselves as far as possible love of all creatures in order to place it in the Creator of them, loving him in all creatures and all creatures in him..." We are urged 'to help make God our Creator and Lord better known and served' (C.307). In Part X which is the final chapter on the preservation and development of the whole body there is an exhortation 'that we may cooperate with the divine grace according to the arrangement of the sovereign providence of God our Lord. For he desires to be glorified both through the natural means, which he gives as Creator, and through supernatural means, which he gives as the Author of grace...' (C.814).

Ecological Conversion

In most of our communities the 'ecological conversion' called for by Pope John Paul II is visible and in some it is advanced. Many good ideas for living more sustainably are put into practice. However, we cannot let things rest at the 'action' level only. Most responsible citizens, regardless of religious background, are involved in such worthy schemes – saving power, re-cycling paper, making use of natural water sources where possible, avoiding plastic containers and wrapping, sponsoring Fair Trade products and so on. This is excellent and necessary but the conversion called for is a conversion of heart, a change of values by which we live our lives. Only a spiritual conviction can ensure that this is durable. We have that spirituality and it is for this reason that even the politicians are now listening to the voices of religious people as people who witness to their convictions. Only an 'ecological conversion' will bring us back from the brink of extinction. Pope Benedict XVI has recently invited religious to be counter-cultural witnesses: *'...one sees too few models of what self-denial could look like concretely. In this respect the religious communities are important as examples.'*¹²

¹⁰ English Vita (Briefe Relation). Catholic Records Society (2008) 98

¹¹ C 156, 272, 288, 305, 307, 547 (2), 554, 596, 602, 698, 701, 779 & 814.

¹² Benedict XVI *The Light of the World* (2010).

Mary Ward and the Signs of our times

Mary Ward was above all a woman ahead of her times, a prophet in that she was gifted by God to interpret the signs of the times. Her response was radical – going to the heart of what it meant to be a woman in the church, and with a spirituality that was considered impossible for women. We are her heirs and the church looks to us to give radical meaning to the signs of our times. These signs are clearly evident for ‘those who have eyes to see and ears to hear’ (Mk.8:18). We are systematically destroying God’s creation and endangering that life of which God destined ‘he would bring everything together under Christ, as head, everything in the heavens and everything on earth’ (Eph.1:10).

Among the signs of the times we note today is the need for inter-religious dialogue. Peoples of all faiths have a common cause in caring for the Earth. More progress can usually be made by entering into a dialogue of common interests and concerns than in discussing points of theology. ARC (Alliance of Religions and Conservation www.arcworld.org) would be one such starting point.

Religious Congregations and Ecology

Many religious congregations have used the opportunities of their international networks and social presence on the ground to make an institutional commitment to ecological conversion, first among their own members and to the wider community, especially to the poor who live on the margins and are the first to suffer when the world becomes ecologically stressed. The whole issue of justice towards and poor and intergenerational justice cannot be dealt with adequately here but are important issues. In *Caritas in Veritate* Benedict XVI writes extensively on eco-justice: ‘the environment is God’s gift to everyone, and in our use of it we have a responsibility towards the poor, towards future generations and towards humanity as a whole,’ (48) and, ‘the Church has a responsibility towards creation and she must assert this responsibility in the public sphere. In so doing she must defend not only earth, water and air as gifts of creation that belong to everyone. She must above all protect mankind from self-destruction.....our duties towards the environment are linked to our duties towards the human person, considered in himself and in relation to others.’ (51)

Religious Congregations are making use of General Congregations to make statements about their stance on eco-issues and in this they are being followed by the national Conferences of Religious. In September 2009 at the Indian COR meeting attended by 550 major religious superiors resolved: “Greening consecrated life is the most demanding theme, and it has to be incorporated into every aspect of religious life.”

Women called to bring Hope

The Congregatio Jesu with its Ignatian spiritual heritage and radical foundress who believed that ‘women in time would do much’ is well placed to take a lead in positioning eco-spirituality and eco-justice at the centre of our charism. We are, after all, women called to bring hope.

Frances Orchard CJ, Rome, January 2011