



## Ecological Conversion

Inspired by A Creed for Today ch.17 by Donal Dorr

contributed by Dominique Treacy

Ecological Conversion has four dimensions:

- 1) affective, 2) intellectual, 3) moral commitment,
- 4) moral conversion in practice



### Part 1: Affective Ecological Conversion



The most immediate and central is affective conversion. This has to do with how we feel rather than how we think. Once we are affectively converted we feel different about the animals, the trees, the plants, the landscape, the stars, and the people around us. We have a sense of being linked to them, of being part of this extraordinary web of life and of the whole cosmos. We may have a sense of awe when we look at the face of a child, or look through a microscope at the complexity and beauty of a daisy. And we marvel at the whole process of evolution through which all these realities emerged over billions of years.

Furthermore, if we are affectively converted we can at times experience something of the joy, the beauty and the life-energy of the creatures around us. We may even share something of the joyful abandonment described by the poet Patrick Kavanagh in his poem 'October': Collected Poems p. 218

*'I want to throw myself on the public street without caring  
For anything but the praying that the earth offers.'*

The affective aspect of conversion remains truncated and even distorted if we fail to respond to the invitation of Pope Francis to allow ourselves

*'to become painfully aware, to dare to turn what is happening to the world into our own personal suffering' (Ls, 19).*

It is important for each of us to allow ourselves to fully experience this pain and our responsibility for what is happening. We must not try to avoid it or to distract ourselves from feeling it. If we do not let in the full weight of the grief and guilt we feel, we will find ourselves stuck, unable to move on to effective action.

I venture to add that I, as a Christian who is part of the more privileged segment of humanity, have to acknowledge my own sinful situation, my culpable immersion in a sinfully exploitive way of life (and death). I must face up to the painful and angry challenge put to each of us so powerfully by Greta Thunberg in her address at the \united \nations on 23 September 2019:

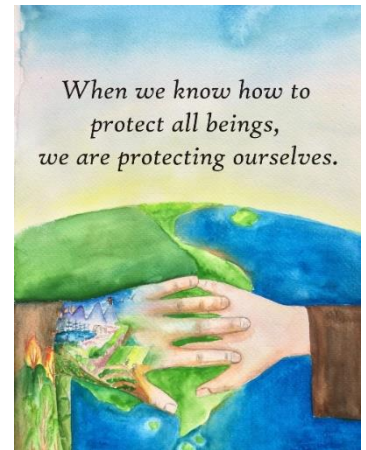


*"You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words".*



## Part 2: Intellectual ecological conversion

It is scientifically verifiable that the Earth is being damaged irreparably by human activity. Waking up to this reality is the intellectual aspect of our conversion. “We see with new eyes”. It is a new and richer understanding of how and why we are so interconnected. It means that we begin to realise how the process of evolution has operated in our universe from the very beginning. Evolution has become real for us because we see it taking place all around us; and we even have some inkling of the direction in which it is moving – towards ever-greater interconnected complexity.

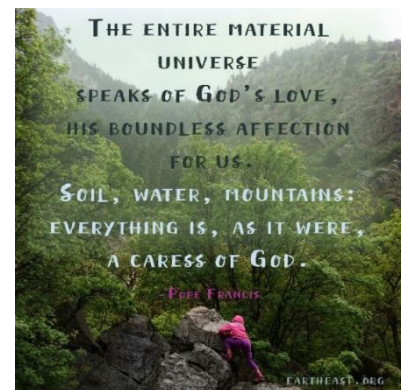


Once we begin to understand the process of evolution and the interconnection between the different aspects of our world, we can no longer deny the myriad ways in which our modern way of life is disrupting the natural pattern of nature. We wake up to an awareness of the immense damage that is being done to innumerable non-human creatures, as well as to the humans who have been pushed to the margins of our world. The crucial element of the disruption of our world is the utterly unjustified sharp distinction that has been made between what is called ‘nature’ on the one hand and, and on the other hand, human ‘society’.

## Part 3: The moral aspect of conversion: commitment to care for the Earth

The moral aspect is validated by the intellectual aspect, our new awareness... our new eyes.

Our moral commitment is sustained and effective to the extent that it is rooted in a deep affective ecological conversion. There is a very solid biblical basis for this moral undertaking. New ways of translating certain key passages have helped in this area. Eg. Wisdom ch.9, v.2



*“In your wisdom you have formed us to care for the creatures produced by you’.*

In Laudato Si, Pope Francis says that our ‘dominion’ over the universe should be understood more properly in the sense of responsible stewardship (Ls 116). He offers an interesting interpretation of the words of Genesis:



*“Although 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 dominion over other creatures. The biblical texts are to be read in their context, recognizing that they tell us to ‘till and keep’ the garden of the world (Gen 2, 15). Tilling refers to cultivating, ploughing or working, while keeping means caring, protecting, overseeing and preserving. This implies a relationship of mutual responsibility between human beings and nature. (Ls,67)*

And Pope Francis goes on to say:

*It would also be a mistake to view other living beings as mere objects subjected to arbitrary human domination. (Ls, 82)*

#### **Part 4: Moral Ecological conversion in Practice**

Pope Francis calls this: “An Integral Ecology” (LS, 137, 156, 159, 225, 230).

This implies living in a manner that respects the environment. We see that we are obliged

- to join with others in campaigning and putting pressure on governments and business leaders - to put in place a set of laws and international treaties to prevent the exploitation of vulnerable people and our vulnerable Earth. Furthermore we must commit ourselves  
- to repairing the damage that has already been done by human activity to the community of beings on Earth.

Key points are

- to keep fossil fuels in the ground and develop alternative energy sources,
- to develop effective public transport systems,
- to subsidise full insulation of homes and public buildings,
- to allow significant areas of our land to be rewilded and
- to encourage a movement from the production and consumption of meat to protein-rich vegetables.

There is no way we can live effectively to these commitments unless we challenge the model of development that has now been adopted in almost every country in the world.

Primo Levi (in Collected poems) described the problem in vivid terms. Having pointed out that the rivers, the glaciers, the continents, the stars and the planets all obey ‘the immutable laws of the universe’, he goes on to say:

*“Not us. We rebellious offspring  
With great brain power, little sense,  
Will destroy, defile,  
Always more feverishly.  
Very soon we will extend the desert  
Into the amazon forests,  
Into the living heart of our cities,  
Into our very hearts.*



It has now become clear that our moral conversion must include a political conversion of the kind that liberation theologians have called for: a radical transformation of the exploitive structures of society. In *Laudato si*, Pope Francis begs us to hear the cry of the Earth and the cry of the poor (Ls, 49).