



Bringing Earth back from the brink

This Saturday (March 25th, 2017) marks the tenth anniversary of the first Earth Hour event. While it may be symbolic, this annual hour of darkness shines a light on the immense pressure that the earth is under. In a recent interview, Sr. Nuala Harty, OLA, shares some of her thoughts about our planet and the little things we can do to bring it back from the brink.



A view of Ballycotton Bay, Co. Cork. Image courtesy of Sr. Nuala Harty.

Sr. Nuala Harty, retired teacher and psychotherapist, explains where her passion for the environment came from. She goes back to her growing-up near Ladysbridge, in rural East Cork. Her eyes twinkle as she described her childhood experiences:

"I always loved nature as a child. I come from a big family, so I would often 'escape' from it all by going up to a high field behind the house overlooking the sea, where I would sit in the middle of a lovely "Fairy Lios" and enjoy the scenery. In one direction you could see a wide farming expanse rolling almost as far the mountain ranges in north Cork and Tipperary. Looking south were Garryvoe and Ballycotton Bay, and out at sea the big boats were making their way into Cork Harbour or away to magical far-away places. That was the time for dreaming, for loving the sheer beauty of nature."

Later in life, an environmental campaign in her area awoke her to the threat of modern progress:



“A big pharmaceutical company wished to site a chemical plant in Killeagh, a few miles from home. It would bring jobs and prosperity. But this was an area of prime agricultural land and clean water; could it be polluted and left unusable once the profits are made and they move elsewhere? So there was tension between those wanting the jobs and those wanting to protect the environment. Later I was overjoyed when learning that the project would not proceed. The local debate and conflict that had gone on educated me somewhat on how our planet can be polluted, and how we need to be very alert when a big multinational is promising great things if we allow them in to an area.”

Sr. Nuala (pictured left) shares the general fear of the climate change which has been stealing up on us. She is aware of how it is making life difficult and destroying communities. From their missions in Africa she has this one example – something doubtlessly being replicated over and over in other places:

“An OLA Sister from Nigeria tells me that desertification around Lake Chad is forcing the Fulani – a nomadic tribe – to move south in search of grasslands for their animals. This means they are encroaching on the land being farmed by settled communities, and is causing much conflict.”

'Cows have died'

Another danger to the planet's health is plastic waste of the non-biodegradable variety. Sr. Nuala gives one example of the damage caused by thrown away plastics.

“In our Bugisi community in Tanzania, one of the Sisters is qualified in agriculture and runs a small farm. Over two years, eight of their cows have died because of plastic wrappers that had got mixed up in the grass they were ingesting. This is the kind of damage done on one small farm. The far greater damage done by thrown-away plastics world-wide, on land and on sea, boggles the mind.”

'The crowning of all work'

Sr. Nuala goes on to outline how Care for the Environment is an on-going concern for OLA Province in Ireland. As missionaries, they are fully aware that it is the poor in underdeveloped areas of the world who will suffer most from climate change. They realise that effective commitment to care of the planet must be based on a solid spirituality of gratitude, praise, respect and humility before God's wonderful creation. They try to recapture the old Celtic spirituality of nature which is so beautifully summed up in Joseph Mary Plunkett's poem *"I See His Blood upon the Rose."* They bring the environment and all those who care for it to their daily prayer.

From her neatly arranged folder, Sr. Nuala begins to share some of the work being produced by Irish writers about what is happening in our planet today – referring to John Feehan of Dublin University, Father Hugh O'Donnell, Salesian, and Father Seán McDonough, Columban. She looks up and delightedly declares: *"The crowning of all the work that has been going on over the years is the appearance of "Laudato Si" – the Papal Encyclical on "Care for Our Common Home"*. In it, Pope Francis speaks of the rise of consumerism and environmental degradation while highlighting the impact of irresponsible development and global warming, and focuses on how we need to change.



Snowdrops at Ardfoyle Convent. Image courtesy of Sr.Nuala Harty. A copy of 'Laudato Si' courtesy of www.zenit.org.

Earth Hour 2017

Earth Hour is an opportunity to reflect on the darkness of environmental damage in our world and ourselves, and to share the light of "*Laudato Si.*" Like many other places across the globe, Ardfoyle Convent will dim the lights this Saturday evening. This is their plan for that special hour:

"In Ardfoyle, we will put out all non-essential lights in and around the convent; we will gather in candle-light to sing a hymn or two, to share some poems or readings, to reminisce about the times here in Ireland or on the missions before electricity arrived, and to share some good news stories of what is being done in different places, by individuals, by groups big and small, to care for the environment.

"In daily life, lest we forget, we have the 'OLA Contract on the Environment' posted prominently on the community room wall, reminding us all of practical things which make a difference, in general housekeeping, in the garden and in our interaction with the wider world."

What can we do?

With increasing consciousness of the environmental fragility of the world around us, Sr. Nuala peppers the conversation with some ways we can help change the course of history, admitting some of these won't make her flavour of the month!

"In travelling, we like to be in control, so we go by car rather than bus or train. The exponential growth in air travel over the last thirty years is a huge offender by its use of fossil fuel. Raising beef for the table places a heavy burden on the environment. Inside the home, can we reduce our use of electricity, of water and of chemical detergents and cleaning materials? Outside, pesticides and herbicides are destroying the bees, the worms and the birds. Can we do anything about these excesses? Could we perhaps plant more trees or shrubs instead of nurturing the perfect lawn ?

"These are unpopular ideas. But when I think of the kind of world we are passing on to my grandnieces and grandnephews, at the risk of being seen as a fanatic or a crank, I cannot keep silent.

"A phrase that gives me energy for this work: 'All that lives is holy.'"