

# **Ecological Conversion:**

## **Going Deeper, Journeying Farther, Responding Boldly and Creatively**

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Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si'* calls us to ecological conversion in Chapter 6, Section 3. This presentation will help us to explore how we engage in ecological conversion and how we help others explore this topic. As I began to prepare this topic, I realized that although I have begun my own process of ecological conversion, it is not an area where I have a lot of expertise. As I struggled for a place to begin, I realized that what I do know a lot about is emotional development in young children. As I thought about it, I could see the parallels between child development and my own process of ecological conversion and all seemed to mesh nicely with the ecological conversion literature.

Ecological conversion is both developmental and transformational. It can be incremental with observable signposts or it can be a spontaneous leap to a new level of consciousness that changes the lens through which we perceive the world and radically alters our actions in the world. Most often it is a combination of both.

Ecological conversion is interior and personal but the manifestation of our growing ecological conversion is observable in the world and often engages others, who join into a communal ecological conversion. When this happens, the beauty is the shared richness and the communal support we experience in a group.

Let us begin with prayer.

### **Opening Prayer: Guided Meditation**

I invite you to think about a place in nature that is special to you.

In *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis talks about how good it is to reflect on childhood places or places that were special to you. Pope Francis says, "The entire material universe speaks of God's love, [God's] boundless affection for us. Soil, water, mountains: everything is, as it were, a caress of God. The history of our friendship with God is always linked to particular places...; going back to these places is a chance to recover something of [our] true selves."

So, let's enter into this prayer.

I invite you into a posture of prayer, whatever that looks like for you. If it's comfortable, you can close your eyes or gaze downward without focusing on anything. As we open up to this

process of prayer, take a deep breath, breathing in sister air and breathing out to ground ourselves, to connect with our bodies, our own creation within us.

Feel your body present here. Connect with your breath, the breath of God, which we all share. Now bring to mind a place that is special to you. This might be from your childhood, or a place you visited on a trip, or even a place that you have just seen in pictures that has particular meaning to you. Bring it into your mind as vividly as possible as if you are there right now. Notice the colors and the shapes as you gaze around this place. Imagine the sounds you might be hearing, any smells, walk around a little bit and see what you can touch, whether it's a tree or the sand, but allow yourself to fully enter into this special place and notice how it makes you feel to be here.

In *Laudato Si'*, we are reminded that creation is speaking to us with words of love. So, as you are in this special place, do you hear any words of love from God through creation? Just notice what you hear. Don't worry if you don't hear anything. Sometimes being receptive to the possibility is enough. Some messages are beyond words. Allow yourself to receive, to relax, to trust. *[reader pause]*

And as we close this mediation, just offer a silent prayer of gratitude for this special time with creation. Amen.

### **Attachment: Care for the Earth**

Probably most of us were able to remember a place or go to a place in nature that is meaningful to us. The peace, deep relaxation, and perhaps transcendence that we experienced in nature calls forth a lasting emotional response that we can remember and re-experience. Ecological conversion begins with that emotional response of feeling our connection, perhaps even our oneness with the earth. Pope Francis calls it "our common home." We know it as a place where we are safe, nurtured, calmed, and at rest.

For many of us, this appreciation and value of nature comes naturally. However, that resonance is not true for everyone. Some of us have to work at feeling comfortable out in nature with its bugs, weeds, and hills. If this is you, you may wish to recall the natural world immediately around you where you experience sun, gazing at the stars or clouds, enjoying flowers. Our own body is made of stardust and shares much of the same DNA as other parts of our world. So, these options can also be a place to begin.

One of the things we can do as part of our ecological conversion is to spend time in nature or with the experience that we used for the opening prayer and allow ourselves to contemplate the love that we have for that most special place and the many places that invite us to feel

deeply centered. It is the making time to experience this love that is important and helps us deepen our ecological conversion.

Just as a child needs that special feeling of bondedness with its mother or caregiver to feel safe and cared for, so too do we need to feel that bondedness with earth, to feel that attachment and love that will enable us to willingly make hard choices to protect our earth. Our ecological conversion begins with our loving relationships with the planet and the dear neighbor, which is really all of creation.

If we have healthy emotional development during our first 18 months, some of the earliest positive emotions we experience are joy, wonder, and trust. The young child experiences joy as it learns to walk, say words, and play with toys. This kind of joy is often the emotions we experience in nature. I remember being overwhelmed with joy after hours of mountain climbing to peer out at the continental divide for the first time. I remember another time staring with wonder as mist danced around the base of Arapaho Mountain. I remember learning to trust my skills that I could safely navigate mountain trails that took me to incredible sights. It's important to remember these feelings and tap into them when we need to be reminded of our relationship with our world.

Many of us have shared profound experiences with others about our time in nature. Sharing this helps remind others of their connections to our earth. Sharing these connections can also help a group move towards greater ecological conversion. Actually, any group working on earth issues will be strengthened for the work if they spend some time reminding themselves that the reason they do this work is love of our common home.

Of course, the first years of life can be hurtful for young children when their needs are not met. Child abuse, malnourishment, ill health, and exploitation damage relationships that should be based on love and trust. So too, when we view damage to our planet, we are hurt and distressed, sometimes angry. It's important to remember that these emotions are signs of our connection with the earth. They remind us of a significant relationship, and we want to do what we can to heal any disconnection.

## **Venturing Out to Form an Individual Identity**

As children get a little older, they venture further away from their caretakers, taking risks, becoming scared, getting lost and hurt. They are trying to figure out who they are. They know they are separate from their parents but not really sure how. They begin testing different ways of being and they often do it in unique if not always effective ways.

Even as we are grounded by unifying love in our relationship with Earth and all its creatures, our first efforts at acting on our radical ecological conversion can often be awkward, just like that young child venturing away from their parent or having a tantrum when they don't get their way. We know what we want to say but cannot always find a persuasive or socially acceptable way to say it.

We want to act differently from the conventional wisdom of our peers and society but the fear of criticism and risk of standing out can cause us to cower back to conformity. We worry that we are not smart enough or do not know enough to justify our actions and persuade others. It's important to recognize that this is a normal pattern of growth. Pushing yourself to do things that feel uncomfortable is part of your process of ecological conversion. These challenges are emerging in you. It helps to examine your lack of comfort and extreme emotions. If you are incredibly angry at what is happening in the world today, that is understandable. Figuring out how to use that uncomfortable anger to guide you to rationale steps you can take, rather than letting your fear of your anger push you back to conformity or to acting on your anger in non-helpful ways, is an essential step in ecological conversion. You will make mistakes. It is important to forgive yourself, learn from those mistakes, and try again.

Often when we are engaging in a group ecological conversion process, it is because someone has invited or inspired us to join. One of the dangers in this situation is to just go with the flow of the group and never really test out your own emerging skills. Pushing yourself into an uncomfortable situation is really important in growth towards conversion.

Recently, a group of sisters I live with had a videoconference with aides from our Senator's office. We gave a well thought out presentation with me taking the lead but everyone saying something. We handled questions well. However, at the end of our dialogue a sister who had not ever done this type of office visit before but had been writing letters for years asked to say something. Her comments went something like this, "I appreciate that Senator Blunt always writes a letter back to me which is responsive to what I said in my letter. I never feel like I am getting a form letter." Of everything that was said and what we gave them in writing, I know it was that sisters' sentiment that made the strongest impression and greatly improved our credibility. Her taking that risk was well worth it.

## **Empathy**

Long before children develop a conscience, they develop empathy for those that enter their orbit. During your ecological conversion, you will find yourself becoming more and more aware about how choices you and the society in which you live make impact others, perhaps in your community or maybe around the world. Attending to those feelings can lead you to a genuine moral conversion. Your awareness of the other can help you opt to make choices for the good

of the other and the whole planet, even though this might mean setting aside your personal preferences and desires.

Several years ago, as I was working on the world map for the Sisters of St Joseph International Center, I was working with several pictures of children attending school with our sisters on the Ivory Coast. At the same time, someone suggested that I watch the documentary, "The Dark Side of Chocolate." The contrast of what I saw in the documentary of young children in the Ivory Coast being tricked into human slavery to harvest chocolate contrasted with these happy children attending school, was so moving to me that I decided to only eat fair-trade chocolate. After making this commitment it was amazing to me how much non-fair-trade chocolate there was available. Everywhere I went people were offering me chocolate. I was turning them down. Eventually, I realized that I needed the courage to say that I was saying no because I only ate fair trade chocolate because of my concerns about human trafficking in the chocolate industry. All these years later, it is still sometimes awkward to say it in social situations. With friends, with whom I have talked about this, I am much more crass. I frequently say, "made by slaves" as they offer me chocolate.

Whereas slavery is always morally and ethically wrong, when I was trying to learn about single use plastics in Japan, I realized that things are not always as simple as they seem. In Japan, a very high value is placed on hygiene, which is why so many items are wrapped in single-use plastics, some with multiple wrappings. This strong cultural value contrasts with Japan's desire to reduce its single-use plastics because they also are concerned about the environment. In Japan, much of the single-use plastic is burned to produce energy, but again there is a growing awareness that this type of secondary use of plastics is not best practice for the environment. Empathy for people as they try to decide between two competing goods and figure out ways to address something they clearly identify as a problem is important. In our world, a one-size-fits-all solution will not work. Cultural factors need to be understood to enable a sense of genuine empathy. Understanding this conflict, I really enjoyed some of the videos I saw with young people in Japan trying to find solutions.

### **Conscience Development: Ethics for the Planet**

Once a child has bonded with their parent or caretaker, begun to make autonomous decisions, and developed a genuine sense of empathy, it is then that they can begin to develop a more concrete sense of right and wrong. Conscience development can occur because the child is ready for abstract thinking and firmly attached to family in unifying love. They can understand that certain activities are wrong not so much because they upset their caretaker but because they can see and experience the harm.

Many adults probably try to jump right in to developing an intellectual ethic about the environment. They are well prepared with the latest scientific evidence about the damage that single-use plastics cause to the earth. They have the research on the latest technological methods to address these problems.

Pope Francis in *Laudato Si'* reminds us that "To seek only a technical remedy to each environmental problem which comes up is to separate what is in reality interconnected and to mask the true and deepest problems of the global system." Later he shares, "Any technical solution which science claims to offer will be powerless to solve the serious problems of our world if humanity loses its compass, if we lose sight of the great motivations which make it possible for us to live in harmony, to make sacrifices and to treat others well. Believers themselves must constantly feel challenged to live in a way consonant with their faith and not to contradict it by their actions. They need to be encouraged to be ever open to God's grace and to draw constantly from their deepest convictions about love, justice, and peace."

So, as we move deeper into our ecological conversion, and judge what is right and wrong about our ways of living on the planet, we benefit by looking at the core values of our personal faith and societal norms and measuring our decisions against them. This type of rigorous examination of our motivations can lead us to decisions that we can confidently live by. We need to prepare ourselves for the huge conflict we will face when our ethical stance comes into conflict with something that impacts our livelihood, financial benefit, or convenience. These are hard struggles but are an important part of our conversion. Having a support group traveling this road with you is helpful.

Much of the damage that is being done to our earth and to the most marginalized people occurs because of greed and seeking short-sighted gains. It seems like a monumental effort to make even the smallest improvements. However, activists have made significant gains in the area of single-use plastics by studying the issue, presenting compelling facts, encouraging companies to see the growing empathy and outrage of their customers for this abuse of our earth, the animals and people who are harmed by items that are not recycled. A growing audience is convinced that this type of pollution is not sustainable for our planet and continuing as we are is morally and ethically wrong. These activists have created metrics and are challenging the biggest polluters to change their ways. The annual report they produce entitled "Waste and Opportunity" shows us how the top 50 companies in the world rank on plastic packaging. This strategy appears to be working as top companies like Unilever, Nestle, Colgate-Palmolive, Johnson and Johnson have realistic plans for improvement. They understand that continuing as they have will harm their business as customers refuse to buy their products.

## Conclusion

*Laudato Si'* calls us to environmental conversion. This calls us to love, to risk, to feel, and to closely examine our motivations and our actions. It transforms us interiorly and changes the way we relate to the planet. It is a personal conversion, but it manifests itself in concrete action in the world.

Those of us who have worked hard to address climate change are often mystified by those who are not concerned about it. Lately, when I go for my morning exercise walks I am so aware of all the plastics that are discarded on our streets. I think about the people that disposed of them. Whereas I used to get angry, I now reflect on it from a developmental perspective. Perhaps these people who litter do not feel a strong attachment to the earth. It is a habit they developed that no one has corrected. Perhaps they are unaware or don't care about the impact their actions have on other people. Perhaps their convenience seems more important to them. I never consider that they don't think littering is wrong. We all learned that in school. It's just that it is not important to them.

For this reason, I believe that the most important aspects of ecological conversion are the ones that relate to our emotions. It is the unifying love for the earth and all it contains, the willingness to overcome my fears and with courage stand for what we believe, and to truly empathize with the other that's what sustains us in this journey. A well thought out, ethical position is certainly helpful in engaging others. However, it's what pulls at our emotions that will sustain us in this ongoing effort.

As Bernard Lonergan, a noted Jesuit philosopher and theologian wrote, "By conversion is understood the transformation of the subject and his world. ... It is as if one's eyes were opened and one's former world faded and fell away .... Conversion is existential, intensely personal, utterly intimate. But it is not so private as to be solitary. It can happen to many, and they can form a community to sustain one another in their self-transformation.