



## Four Dimensions of Ecological Conversion

by Sr. Mary Ann Casanova, Sisters of St Joseph of the Sacred Heart

### BEGINNINGS

It doesn't require much from us to imagine Earth mulched with the discards of modern life. Pope Francis begins his 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si'* with descriptions of Earth bearing piles of filth. It does require some powerful re-imagining of the human species for us to begin to reclaim and restore Earth.

I believe such a re-imagining to be a form of ecological conversion. When partnered with an increasing ecological consciousness, it can flip the human species back into right relationship with creation. We *Homo sapiens* have the capacity to be *dear neighbors* to all. We have the capacity to shake off what Pope Francis names as misguided distractions and counterfeit accretions that lead to a misguided life [#122].

A mutualistic relationship exists between the formation of one's ecological consciousness and the depth of one's understanding of the environment. The deeper and more intimate the understanding, the more prominent the role of ecological consciousness becomes. Each thought and feeling are relevant since ecological consciousness heightens perceptions of interconnectedness. Ultimately ecological consciousness becomes a primary guide for action.

Ecological consciousness, like all relationships, is dynamic and ever-changing. While conversion describes "a radical shift of one's fundamental orientation, one's horizon, [and] an ongoing process toward consistent self-transcendence and authenticity" (Ormerod and Vanin 2016, 330), ecological conversion additionally involves the reshaping of the very concept of the of humanity's place and role in the Earth community.

Dimensions of significant change or conversion have been studied by Lonergan and Doran. Bernard Lonergan first identified the religious, moral and intellectual as the arenas of conversion. Robert Doran added the psychic arena as the fourth dimension.

### Religious/spiritual conversion

Lonergan's framework takes religious conversion to be the starting point. Surrender is at the heart of religious conversion. Regardless of one's religious alliances, conversion begins with moving beyond one's self to the recognition of the transcendent, and then to falling in love with this transcendent reality.

The Abrahamic faith traditions interpret this falling in love as loving God, loving *all* that God loves, and loving as God loves (Ormerod and Vanin 2016, 334). A movement beyond self-absorption and self-centeredness accompanies the delight and reverie in creation. Ecological consciousness impels individuals and collectives of persons to radical attitudinal and behavioral conversion. The adoption of practices of self-restraint and sacrifice such as voluntary simplicity is prompted by a growing awareness of the reality of suffering, sin and evil in the world.

### Moral conversion

The second dimension of moral conversion encompasses changes in the very criteria, choices and values that govern one's decisions and actions. Pope Francis recognizes the centrality of moral and spiritual conversion (Deane-Drummond 2017) as enabling agents for all the citizens of Earth to address the present planetary crisis. Growth toward authentic morality, that is morality that is in keeping with principles of Catholic Social Teaching, is summarized in Lonergan and Doran's values.

Lonergan and Doran place ignorance and willful malicious conduct on opposing ends of a continuum of awareness and action. The great-great-grandchildren ask poet Drew Dillinger in his dreams, "What did you do once you knew?" (Dellinger 2017). We know that the environmental crisis besetting Earth has its roots in human decisions and actions. We members of the human species can plead ignorance no longer. Moral conversion enhances our abilities to hear the voices of the Earth community and to see with loving eyes.

Ecological consciousness carries with it the burden of being aware of unintended consequences. There is a growth in awareness of the multiplicity of levels or scales on which one's thinking, ethical and political actions becoming habitual (Morton 2018, loc 669 and 841). The habits of one's mind, heart and daily life require frequent review. For Catholics, ecology is subject matter in the practice of examination of conscience.

### **Intellectual conversion**

Loneragan considers the third dimension, intellectual conversion, to be a relatively rare occurrence. Intellectual conversion is a lifelong process and involves a radical clarification of one's cosmology (Ormerod and Vanin 2016, 331) in ways that exceed paradigm shifts. Distorted perceptions of reality, objectivity and human knowledge are overcome, allowing that which is authentic to remain and flourish.

Ecological consciousness facilitates a human comprehension, and differentiated understanding of these interrelationships is a manifestation of a higher form of knowledge. In the first instance, this ecological knowledge is expressed as descriptive knowledge. Facts, diagrams, data and empirical studies are standard tools of descriptive knowledge. Explanatory knowledge raises the level of consciousness beyond modes of description by offering causal understandings.

### **Psychic conversion**

Doran's dimension of psychic conversion is particularly relevant to considerations of ecological conversion and consciousness. This dimension of conversion refers to the reorientation of the person through human self-transcendence. Psychic conversion leads to a heightening of one's values and sensitivities such as elevated experiences of beauty, goodness, love and truth (Ormerod and Vanin 2016, 332). Christians associate many aspects of psychic conversion as graced moments: moments when one knows oneself to have been, as the Celts would say, in a "thin place"; moments when the theosphere and the biosphere brush against one another.

## **GROUNDING THIS WITH A CARONDELET STORY**

With my 21<sup>st</sup> century eyes, I would like to visit and link the concepts I have presented with a Carondelet story. I first encountered this story in 2013 while on sabbatical in Tucson, Arizona. I offer the following version (my adaptation) of Sister Monica Corrigan, CSJ's diary account of her 36-day journey with six other sisters from St. Louis to Tucson some 150 years ago.

### **Trek of the Seven Sisters**

The group leaves St Louis on railway tracks familiar and known.

Comfortable seating in clean new railcars soon gives way to densely filled cars

There's a motley crowd of emigrants.

Children cry.

The atmosphere is generally offensive—it's an odd mixture of chickens, eggs and cigars.

The rail gauge narrows.  
The distance between Omaha and the seven widens.  
Sisters and their fellow travelers engage.  
Each one's faith and opinions are readily set aside.  
Through simple exchanges and gestures human neighbors becoming dear.  
The Indian people, however, remain as objects—  
a source of background music;  
they are "poor creatures" grabbing at candy we throw onto the dusty ground,  
and the not so modestly attired old women who dress their hair with a mixture of mud and  
water.

The Rocky Mountains are partially obscured.  
Frightful and desolate.  
The chasms are deep, full of terror and potential peril.  
They pass through the 'Devil's Gate'  
and repeatedly crisscross an angry impetuous Weber River.  
Then a fleeting sense of comfort.  
Barren mountains and bleak rocky scenery yield to flower gardens, shade and fruit trees.  
The familiar is the beautiful.  
But it too is left behind.

A week into the journey the climate changes.  
The days are oppressively hot.  
The mornings chillingly cold.  
The ugly dreary landscape slowly morphs into one which is awe-inspiring.

A stop in San Francisco restores land-legs,  
All too soon sea-legs are required.  
Then a great many physical discomforts.  
A small wagon on a long, perilous journey.  
Exposure to the tropical sun by day and cold desert nights,  
sleeping under the stars or under the wagon,  
the presence of wolves and stories of massacres,  
encounters with cactus spines and lonely ranch-men.

Rocks substitute for tables and beds.  
Native flowers substitute for familiar flowers.  
The track becomes a chapel aisle.

Hymns, prayers and processions conducted in nature's cathedral.

Fatigued sisters traverse the hilly American Desert.  
The geology seems as nothing short of an abomination of desolation.  
Ugly mountains of volcanic rock and red sand are a death trap.  
Sisters, settlers and stock battle thirst.  
None spared the steep grades and extremes of temperature.  
None is immune to the effects of high and low altitudes.  
The sisters are walking a biblical distance of forty miles,  
walking through what was once an ancient sea.  
Here the land has a recognizable history of its own.

Rocks give way to a vast bed of sand with inherent risks.  
Travelling under the moonlight in the cool of night brings a certain comfort  
and the recollection of familiar stories of Joseph their patron.

Stables become shared dormitories,  
mutual kindness and respects fill in cultural gaps.  
Eggs become gifts to sustain the journeyers.

The mighty Colorado River is a 400-yard-wide welcome mat to Arizona.  
Its doorposts giant granite rocks.  
The small raft-like tow boat becomes unbalanced.  
Sisters, horses and wagon tumbling between life and death.

A fallen horse,  
a fellow traveler since San Diego,  
ceases to be a neighbor.  
The carriage and its passengers are prevented from rolling into the river.  
The other than human is recognized as dear neighbor.

A break in the journey and a change of circumstances.  
An armed escort of soldiers arrives  
Spirits are nourished by priest and cook alike.  
Hospitality is given and received.  
The trek continues by day and by night.  
Roadside graves revive thoughts of being similarly massacred.  
And yet,  
in a flip,

a noble Pima warrior is perceived as a Guardian Angel.

Seventy-five miles to go.

But first the narrows of the Picacho Pass  
“whips and spurs [are] given to the horse—  
[they go] like lightning—  
the men yelling all the while”.

A raucous caravan drowning out fear in the early hours of the morning

A dress rehearsal for an equally raucous Tucson welcome a few hours later.

### Reimagining the narrative

I'd like to begin to break open and reimagine Sister Monica's narrative from the perspective of personal ecological conversion.

An ecological reading of the text illustrates how changes in physical position may alter one's perspective and worldview. Predictably, the seven sisters forge strong relationship with one another as their epic unfolds. A motley crowd of characters, human and non-human, are woven throughout the text, and many barriers dissolve as the journey progresses. We read of interactions with non-Catholics, those from vastly different cultures and traditions, as well as the pivotal role played by a horse (or two). Hospitality takes on many forms. Notions of beauty are expanded beyond the familiar and the comfortable. Expansiveness such as this takes time.

The sister's perceptions of the passing landscape were very different when they are seated in a train, looking down on what they name as frightful, desolate, terrifying and angry. In comparison, while travelling on foot, the diary shows that they often sang and prayed and imagined themselves in an Egyptian desert with St Joseph. Hence, we can conclude that there is value in getting out into creation, overthrowing the barriers that place us above the natural world and celebrating in the cathedral of nature.

In the absence of furniture and other human-made comforts, the Sister's improvised—rocks became tables, chairs and beds. Like Jesus, they sat down (Matthew 5:1, 13:1, 15:29), in full contact with Earth. Ecological conversion invites us to physically ground our relationship with nature. Each of our senses enables us to physically engage with nature in surprising and personal ways. Most times it is worth risking a few scratches from a cactus or blisters in order to enjoy creation as fully as we can.

Sister Monica comments on the stars, the moon and native flora. We are reminded that falling in love with a loving God requires us to love *all* that God loves, and to love as God loves (Ormerod and Vanin 2016, 334). This is at the heart of our ecological vocation.

Sister Monica records a brief description of part of the American desert. She writes of an area as once having been part of an ancient ocean. Mountains prevented the recession of all the water and hence the formation of the Great Salt Lake, which they were seeing in present time. This vignette is ecological literacy in action. The sisters recognize that the Earth has a history and contains stories of change according to a geological sense of time. Like a geologist schooled in the art of reading Earth's history, we are urged "to become scientifically literate and to situate ourselves in larger planetary processes" (Kim and Koster 2017, loc 721). In giving credence to science and to larger planetary processes, we can develop some sense of familiarity with the extended history of Earth.

The sisters were confronted with their own fears. The likelihood of perishing before reaching Tucson was all too real. Experiencing thirst and seeing carcasses and bones firsthand were among the constant reminders of the fragility of life. This presentation began with an image of Earth bearing layers of mulch in the form of discards of our modern life. We are confronted with the reality that our species, *Homo sapiens*, is an agent of climate change. We have imperiled life on the entire planet. How might we become prudent travelers today?

The following seven points summarize many of the key characteristics of personal ecological conversion arising from the trek narrative. I invite you to continue to break open the trek narrative and discover other pointers and clues as to the nature of personal ecological conversion.

- Ecological conversion is both a communal experience and sustained hard work.
- Ecological conversion requires the deliberate repositioning of oneself to be with creation.
- Ecological conversion is a movement beyond self-absorption and self-centeredness toward delight and reverie in creation.
- Physical relationship with creation promotes ecological conversion.
- A recognition of the dignity and intrinsic value of all species and creation reflects the human capacity to be dear neighbor to all.
- The development of a sense of (and familiarity with) the extended history of Earth based on credible science.
- The recognition that *Homo sapiens* have placed all Earthly life in peril.

## REFERENCES

Deane-Drummond, Celia. 2017. *A Primer in Ecotheology Theology for a Fragile Earth*.

Dellinger, Drew. 2017. "Hieroglyphic Stairway." In *Love Letter to the Milky Way*.  
<http://lovelettertothemilkyway.com/>.

Edwards, Denis. 2006. *Ecology at the Heart of Faith*. Kindle. Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books.

Kim, Grace Ji-Sun, and Hilda P. Koster, eds. 2017. *Planetary Solidarity: Global Women's Voices on Christian Doctrine and Climate Justice*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

Merchant, Carolyn. 2013. *Reinventing Eden: The Fate of Nature in Western Culture*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group.

Morton, Timothy. 2018. *Being Ecology*. Kindle Edition. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Ormerod, Neil, and Cristina Vanin. 2016. "Ecological Conversion: What Does It Mean?"  
*Theological Studies* 77 (2): 328–52. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0040563916640694>.

Pope Francis. 2015. *On Care for Our Common Home: Laudato Si'*. Kindle Edition. Boston: Pauline Books and Media.