

**Reflections at the Re-Dedication of the Sacred Garden  
Mercy International Centre  
25 September 2019**

**A Good Garden**

God began a relationship with Earth and with humanity when the cosmos was created – the story is told in the first chapter of Genesis. Humans began a relationship with God and Earth in a garden “on the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens” – the story is told in the second chapter of Genesis. In that first garden, God, Earth and humanity lived in an intimate, harmonious relationship. Now we are blessing this good garden at Mercy International Centre. We are doing so in a time when we know that “the cry of Earth and the cry of the Poor are one,” in a moment when we are beginning our global journey into the depths of Mercy Global Presence. Let us reflect on what this good garden and intimate, harmonious relationships mean for us and for Earth.

Gardens are part of our earliest memories. When I was a child, we had a front garden in which flowers grew, a back garden in which cabbage and turnips grew, and a hilly garden on which hay for our sheep grew. There is a photograph of me on my first birthday in June walking carefully through the flowers in our front garden. On the back of the photograph is a note from me to my grandfather (in my mother’s handwriting), telling him that I wanted him to have this picture of me because I could not get to see him on my birthday. A lovely brook flowed through our back garden – perfect for paddling and for catching little prickles during the summer months. In all our gardens, wildflowers grew. I always lamented that, because of our late growing season, on the May altar, Mary only had dandelions while on the June Sacred Heart Altar, Jesus got buttercups, wild irises and daisies! ***What are your early garden memories?***

Catherine’s garden memories, gathered in her letters, speak about “a good garden” as one of the qualities of any space that she would choose as a convent. In 1838, she writes Mary Teresa White that Limerick has a lovely old convent with “a good garden.” She seems to equate gardens particularly with good health and healing. In a letter to Frances Warde about Booterstown, she notes that there will be “a good garden for the weak ones.” She writes both Angela Dunne and Frances Warde about the house in Birr, “a good old house – delightfully situated – fields or garden all around it. . . It must be particularly healthy.” In another letter about Birr, she writes to Mary Aloysius Scott, “I hope you have the charity to eat some fresh fruit off the trees, walking in the garden – as that is the way fruit is most beneficial to delicate constitutions.”

Catherine also uses the garden image symbolically. We read in the *Retreat Instructions*, “God looks on the convent where perfect charity reigns as a delightful garden, a paradise where God delights to dwell.” And, again, she counsels the Sisters, “Every religious house is an enclosed garden where all virtues are to grow and flourish. . .As a flower in this garden, I must sow the seeds of every virtue in my heart.”

Gardens are part of being human. Small homes, great palaces, monasteries, temples, public places all have gardens. Among the many kinds of gardens are vineyards, grapevines, medicinal gardens, secluded gardens, vegetable gardens, fruit gardens, orchards, cemetery gardens, fishponds, dovecotes, front gardens, back gardens, flower gardens, rose gardens, botanical gardens, butterfly gardens, kitchen gardens, herb gardens, rock gardens. All gardens are designed, some gently, some in a sophisticated manner.

A garden is a sensory experience. You are immersed in aromas, textures, sounds and tastes – the fragrance of the rose, the texture of the gentle fern or the hardy pine, the sound of the flowing water or chirping robin, the taste of the new carrot or mint leaf, the sight of colour and

shape and size. A garden is an active engagement -- sowing, watering and reaping; seeing and listening; stopping and waiting; remembering and reflecting.

Every religious tradition has embedded in its awareness and in its theology a sense of garden. For Hindus, garden designs are guided by the principals that everything in the universe is sacred and everything is connected. Hindu temple gardens are places of worship, designed to connect people with gods, and places to sit and meditate. A Buddhist garden is a simple, uncluttered garden that reflects Buddhist principles of peace, serenity, balance, compassion, wisdom, determination, courage, goodness and respect for all living things. In the Buddhist garden, lanterns are signs of worship that honour Buddha or revered ancestors. The lotus flower is respected for its ability to provide beautiful blooms even in shallow, stagnant water. At many gardens, the entries are marked by a large stone as a sign of welcome.

Muslims have a memory of the Garden of Eden. In the Quran, the focus is on the return to the Garden and the qualities of those who return. We read in the Quran, "But as for those who believe and do right actions, their Lord will guide them by their faith. Rivers will flow under them in Gardens of Delight. Their call there is: 'Glory be to You, O Allah!' Their greeting there is: 'Peace!'" (*Surah Yunus*, 9-10) The phrase, "Gardens with rivers flowing under them," is repeated in many verses throughout the holy book. There is also a lovely image of the *Companions of the Garden*: "As for those who believe and do right actions and humble themselves before their Lord, they are the Companions of the Garden, remaining in it timelessly, forever (*Surah Hud*, 23)." For Muslims, gardens are places of moral action, physical beauty, and spiritual harmony.

For today's reflection, however, our primary attention is to gardens in our own Christian scriptures. Our Bible begins with the garden and ends with the garden. All key moments in the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament are either in the garden or are symbolized by the garden.

As I said at the beginning, humans began their relationship with God and Earth in a garden "on the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens." Note the deliberate reversal of the phrase from "the heavens and the earth" to "the earth and the heavens." You will remember the story in the second chapter of Genesis. God has created earth and heaven but there are no plants, no herbs, no rain, no water and no one to tend the garden. We are told in verse 6 that water would not be a problem since God would create a river. However, finding a gardener was a bigger challenge. Finally, God creates a man from the dust of the ground and then places him in a specially designed Garden with plants and trees for food as well as a tree of life and a tree of knowledge. That Garden is watered by a river which divides and becomes four rivers which in turn create lands. But the man alone does not work as God had hoped. God creates all the animals and birds, but it still is not enough. Finally, God creates woman and the initial work of creation is complete!

God has carefully thought through how to ensure that the Garden is to be maintained. Water and the gardener are essential. With the creation of man, the animals and birds, and woman, all is in balance and in harmony. We read in Genesis 3:8, the poignant phrase, "They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze." Clearly, God rested confidently, trusting that the balance has been achieved.

The same garden which has been the foundation of right relationships among God, humans and Earth now becomes the place of rupture and disfunction. With the sin of the man and the woman, everything suffers. God is angry. A great divide appears between the animals and humans. Both animals and humans are cursed in their very way of being. The land is terribly damaged. All right relations have been broken. Humans relinquish their intimate dwelling with God, distrust and an imbalance of power erupt between Adam and Eve, the fertile ground is cursed, and the Garden is left lost and empty.

In the following books of the Hebrew Scriptures, restoration, first from slavery in Egypt and later from the Exile, is symbolized by a return to a Garden of plenty. For the exodus from Egypt, God promises a land “flowing with milk and honey.” The Temple, which is built after the entry into the promised Land, becomes through its décor and rituals the new Garden of God. The columns of the Temple are crowned with lilies and decorated with hundreds of pomegranates (1 Kgs.7:18-20), symbols of fertility and life. Its great gold menorah is shaped like an almond tree in full bloom (Ex.37:17-24). The walls are carved with palm trees and flowers and cherubim, the guardians of Eden. The inside of the building smells like the woods since the whole building is lined with cedar (1 Kgs.6:18).

In Isaiah 51:3, written during the time of the Babylonian Exile, we read, “The Lord will comfort Zion; will comfort all her waste places, and will make her wilderness like Eden, her desert like the garden of the Lord; joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the voice of song.” Jeremiah (31:12) echoes the same theme, “They shall come and sing aloud on the height of Zion, and they shall be radiant over the goodness of the Lord, over the grain, the wine, and the oil, and over the young of the flock and the herd; their life shall become like a watered garden, and they shall never languish again.” And, again, in Hosea (14:7), it is so poetically framed, “They shall again live beneath my shadow, they shall flourish as a garden; they shall blossom like the vine, their fragrance shall be like the wine of Lebanon.” This restoration is not only intended for Israel but for all peoples as we hear in Isaiah 61:11, “For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.”

The most poetic expression, however, is found in the *Song of Songs*, the only book of the Hebrew Scriptures in which the dominant voice is the woman’s voice. That book is filled with garden images and symbols, all reflecting harmony and balance with people and Earth (that book never mentions God yet its very presence at the heart of the Scriptures is rooted in God). The most poignant expression of the restoration of harmony through garden images is found in chapter 2:10-13, “My beloved speaks and says to me: ‘Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away; for now the winter is past, the rain is over and gone. The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land. The fig tree puts forth its figs, and the vines are in blossom; they give forth fragrance.’”

The scripture scholar, Ellen Davis, concludes that the *Song of Songs* in its entirety envisions a resolution of the abiding problem of exile from the Garden of God which represents the loss of intimacy in three primary spheres of relationship: between God and humanity, between woman and man; and between human and other-than-human creation. The Song uses language to evoke a vision of healing in all three areas. Indeed, the condition of the earth itself is the first and best index of the state of health of the relationship between God and humanity. Davis summarizes, “The poet of the Song understood that the well-being of our world—not just of the individual person, but of the world as a whole—depends upon the human capacity to cultivate intimacy, indeed, love, in all three relational areas.”

Not unexpectedly, the New Testament continues the garden connection of the Hebrew Scriptures. Jesus uses the garden symbolism in parables, “What is the kingdom of God like? And to what should I compare it? It is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in the garden; it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches” (Lk 13:18-19). The same theme is repeated in the parable of the fig tree, “A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he said to the gardener, ‘See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?’ He replied, ‘Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig round it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down’” (Lk 13:6-9).

However, it is in Jesus' suffering, death and resurrection that the garden is most evident, a reversal of the harmony/brokenness of the Garden of Eden. Jesus' last hours begin with his time of reflective contemplation in the Garden of Gethsemane following the Last Supper, "After Jesus had spoken these words, he went out with his disciples across the Kidron valley to a place where there was a garden, which he and his disciples entered" (Jn 18.1). We are told in Matt 26:36-37 that he suffered there, "He said to his disciples, 'Sit here while I go over there and pray.' He took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee and began to be grieved and agitated." In this garden, he is betrayed by Judas and captured by the soldiers. Later, he is betrayed by Peter, "One of the slaves of the high priest, a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, asked, 'Did I not see you in the garden with him?' Again, Peter denied it, and at that moment the cock crowed" (Jn 18:26-27).

After Jesus' crucifixion, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus get permission from Pilate and, "they took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews. Now there was a garden in the place where he was crucified, and in the garden, there was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid. And so, because it was the Jewish day of Preparation, and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there" (Jn 19:40-42). In a simple blessing-poem, John O'Donohue reminds us of the rightness of that garden tomb and of Catherine's burial in this garden:

The wonder of a garden

Trusting the first warmth of spring  
Until its black infinity of cells  
Becomes charged with dream;  
Then the silent, slow nurture  
Of the seed's self, coaxing it.  
The humility of the Earth  
That transfigures all  
That has fallen  
Of outlived growth.  
The kindness of the Earth,  
Opening to receive  
Our worn forms  
Into the final stillness.

It is in this same garden that Mary Magdalene weeps as she grieves the death of her beloved Jesus. "She turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?' Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, 'Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.' Jesus said to her, 'Mary!' She turned and said to him in Hebrew, 'Rabbouni!' (which means Teacher)" (Jn 20:11-16). Note that Jesus does not deny that he is the gardener; rather he simply confirms that he knows Mary and she know him.

The first gardener and his wife were created by God to tend the Garden but, with his wife, he disrupted the harmony of the Garden. Now, in the person of Jesus the Christ, the gardener, with his beloved disciple Mary, restores the harmony and balance in the new garden. Echoing the poetry of the Song of Songs, the well-being of the whole word has been restored because of the human capacity to cultivate intimacy and love in the relations between God and humanity, between man and woman, and between human and other-than-human creation. This sense of the garden as the originating place of harmony, then the place of brokenness and disharmony, and finally the place of restoration is brought to fullness in the last book of the Christian Bible. In the book of Revelation (22:1-2, 12-14), the restoration is beautifully described, "Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either

side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. . . God says, 'See, I am coming soon; my reward is with me, to repay according to everyone's work. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.' Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they will have the right to the tree of life and may enter the city by the gates."

One last voice speaks the themes we have unfolded above. Hildegard of Bingen records God's words to her, "I am the breeze that nurtures all things green. I encourage blossoms to flourish with ripening fruits. I am the rain coming from the dew that causes the grasses to laugh with the joy of life." The inherent greening energy of *viriditas* was foundational to Hildegard's understanding of the Holy Spirit, the vivifying breath that animates all living things. She imagined a vibrant and immanent earthly Spirit, enfleshed, embodied, and encountered in forest, field, and flower. Reflecting on Hildegard's understanding of *viriditas*, DeJong says, "The greening power of God runs in and through us all, affirming the interconnections between all members of the biosphere." She adds, "If we can bespeak the wisdom of the more-than-human world, engaging the plant life, forests, and wind as mysterious powers and entities, we can achieve an intimacy with nonhuman nature that can take us back to what has been lost: ancestral reciprocity with the animate earth that cultivates a culture of belonging." This culture of belonging, nurtured by the garden, then brings us to a new place, "In the wake of such modes of engagement we might be able to receive Hildegard's prescription for physical and spiritual health and well-being: live in mutual exchange with what is the other, and then we will begin to heal ourselves and live holistically as intended with our partnered places and planet."

How do these reflections on garden nurture us for our journey into Mercy Global Presence? Seven markers for the journey are clear:

- ✓ **Gardens are places for embodied contemplation** – an opening of all our senses to the sounds, sights, textures, aromas, fragrances and tastes of the garden enables us to feel that culture of belonging, of mutual exchange with the other.
- ✓ **Gardens are places of healing** – the calm and peace of the space, the fresh fruits and medicinal herbs grown there, the shade of the trees and the good garden, as Catherine would say, bring healing.
- ✓ **Gardens are places of growth and new life** – how rich is Hildegard's imagery of greening power, "Fire of the Holy Spirit, life of the life of every creature, holy are you in giving life to forms. Rivers spring forth from the waters; earth wears her green vigor."
- ✓ **Gardens are places of inclusion** – so many elements come together to build the garden: soil, water, air, light, clouds, seeds, flowers, fruits, trees, vines, fragrant herbs, birds, insects, bees, waterfalls, fountains, ponds, rivers, brooks, rills, rockeries, pathways, benches, burial places, patios, decks, art, sculptures, gazebos, pergolas, follies, lawns, drainage systems and sheds. And as A. A. Milne says so simply yet eloquently, "Weeds are flowers, too, once you get to know them."
- ✓ **Gardens are meeting places** – you cannot walk for even a minute in a garden and not experience a profound encounter – with a snail or a butterfly or a flowering tree or a flowing rill or a colorful stone or a blossoming flower or another human or a dreamlike cloud or . . . Our sensory engagement brings energy, hope and promise. In the words of David Abram, "We are situated in the land in much the same way that characters are situated in a story . . . along with the other animals, plants, stones, trees, and the clouds, we ourselves are characters on a huge stage that is visibly unfolding all around us, participants within the vast imagination, or Dreaming, of the world."
- ✓ **Gardens are threshold places** – the garden is not the house nor is it the countryside or wilderness. It is the connection between the two, the space deliberately designed to bring the two together. O'Donohue reminds us that a threshold "is not a simple boundary; it is a frontier that divides (I would say connects) two territories, rhythms and atmospheres. Indeed, it is a lovely testimony to the fullness and integrity of an experience or a stage in life that it intensifies toward the end into a real frontier that

cannot be crossed without the heart being passionately engaged and woken up. This is one of the reasons such vital crossings were always clothed in ritual. It is wise in your own life to be able to recognize and acknowledge the key thresholds: to take your time; to feel all the varieties of presence that accrue there; to listen inward with complete attention until you hear the inner voice calling you forward.”

As you walk in the Garden or as you sit beside Catherine, hear the words of the Presentation Sister, Raphael Consedine, and acknowledge that this garden is a threshold, a frontier, a boundary where new life and new relationships will be found:

Take your life firmly in your two hands,  
(Gently... you are trusted with something precious)  
While you search your heart's yearnings:  
What am I seeking? What is my quest?  
When your star rises deep within,  
Trust yourself to its leading.  
You will have the light for first steps.  
This is Trasná, the crossing place. Choose!  
This is Trasná, the crossing place. Come!

- ✓ ***Gardens are places of harmony and hope*** – from the Garden of Eden to the Garden of the tomb, from the hopes during the Exile to the final restoration of the rivers in Revelation, we find hope when the time seems darkest and bereft of joy. In one of her stories, Lucy Maud Montgomery writes, “It always amazes me to look at the little, wrinkled brown seeds and think of the rainbows in ‘em,” said Captain Jim. “When I ponder on them seeds, I don’t find it nowise hard to believe that we’ve got souls that’ll live in other worlds. You couldn’t hardly believe there was life in them tiny things, some no bigger than grains of dust, let alone colour and scent, if you hadn’t seen the miracle, could you?” Think of the rainbows in the little, wrinkled brown seeds!

If our journey into Mercy Global Presence is marked by embodied contemplation, healing, growth and new life, inclusion, profound encounters, a threshold where our hearts are passionately engaged and woken up, and harmony and hope, then we will certainly find the new images, the new languages and the new theology which we desperately need to respond to the cry of Earth and the cry of the poor today and tomorrow.

As we gaze in joy and mercy around this sacred space trusting that this garden and all our gardens will continue to nurture and challenge us, we echo the words of Mary Wickham’s poem, *Garden*:

Very much at rights with its origins all this,  
but called too by the crafted orb  
to consider the wider earth, the broader waters of the world-  
the orb that holds tendrils and leaves and butterflies,  
gaps to see the sky and feel the air-  
there- put your hands tenderly through the world-  
hints of creatures supple and sinuous, but no snakes, that’s certain,  
a globe that furls and unfurls the spirals of life  
and today’s tune enticed with that trace of treble clef,  
as it sends the water flowing past names and memories  
from many lands laden with mercy stories,  
all enhanced by the delicate tiled colour of flowers,  
mercy made one art to another, one stone to another,  
one person to another,  
past to present and on it flows.

In the Song of Songs (8:13), the woman cries, “O you who dwell in the gardens, my companions are listening for your voice; let me hear it.” O God of mercy, O Gardener God, you gave us our first garden and invited us to become gardeners with you. We thank you for all gardens which enrich and heal our lives. We thank you for Catherine’s garden, this good garden, which dares us to be people of mercy in new ways, with new energies and new dreams. We thank you for your garden which is Earth herself, holding us in her warm and loving embrace. Walk with us through our gardens. Sit with us by our gardens. Dream with us in our gardens. Dare us to live the promise of our gardens. “O you who dwell in the gardens, my companions are listening for your voice; let us hear it.”

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