



**MERCY  
GLOBAL  
PRESENCE**

# Grassroots Ministry: Presence of/with/to God

**Maura Walsh rsm (The Congregation): 'Presence of God'**

## **In the beginning**

Growing-up in Ireland in an environment of Celtic Spirituality, in which God was not removed from the world and the lives of human beings, was hallowed. God was all around – in the landscape of sea and mountain, bog and forest, in the rising and setting sun, in the comings and goings of the seasons. Everything was sacred. Celtic Spirituality, alive with a felt sense of God in all of life, was part of the very air I breathed as a child, when I was born into this milieu on a rural farm in Co Mayo.



One of the first memories I have, is of my father ploughing the end field of our farm. He was preparing the soil for sowing the seed, while I was preparing to take my first steps. He did such work, very much aware of the presence of God in all of nature. This was true of all of my family. As children, we spent summer holidays working on the farm weeding the drills of potatoes,

turning the mown grass that we would later fork into stacks of hay; going to the bog where we would help with saving the turf needed for the fire, to cook and heat the house for the year ahead. We also helped with harvesting the barley and oats crops before we returned to school in September. My mother prepared the meals and often took them out to the fields to feed the hungry workers. She was the faithful companion in forming the family unit and grounding us in our faith.

One memorable summer's day I had the honour of minding my then three-year-old, fair-haired nephew Darragh who lived in Dublin City. As we meandered along a country lane, I slowly became aware of the wonder and awe that were present within him, in this country place. He had a fascination for ladybirds and lost himself in admiration of them. Children call us to be aware of all we miss in nature when we do not pay attention. Sadly, ladybirds are exceedingly rare now—and I ask myself what has happened to that endearing species? A ten-year research project in England shows that the population of ladybirds has declined from 99.8% in 2006 to 30.7% in 2016 (Wiley on-line Library). The decline has been blamed on changes to habitats, global warming, insecticide use, and the invasion of one species of insect by another. The worrying truth is that the population of all insects is declining globally. There will be a total ecosystem collapse if we lose our insects. What kind of world is emerging for Darragh's children?

## **Commitment**

As I grew older, I was very much aware of the presence of God in all of life. This led me to become a Mercy sister. The motto I chose is, "Walk in God's presence" (Exodus 33:14).

As I have grown in knowledge and understanding, and have been exposed to learning in theology and scripture, my motto has evolved somewhat to, 'My Presence will go with you and I will give you rest.'

Science was my chosen discipline in University. Following my studies, I moved into the teaching ministry. One of the subjects I taught was Biology, and this helped me to continue to grow in awareness of God in all of life, especially in nature. I endeavoured to instil this awareness in my students. Something must have worked since several of them have studied a variety of Science subjects at third level, and some of them are involved in research. I am proud to acknowledge that they are making a positive contribution to our environment.

### **The Universe Story: A Revelation**

My consciousness took a big leap in the early 1980s, when I heard Miriam Therese McGillis OP (of Genesis Farm in New Jersey, USA) give some talks in Ireland, on the Universe Story and the new Cosmology. Her input began with a ritual of the Cosmic Walk. This was a revelation for me. My experience with science had centred on viewing the world through a microscope, but Miriam opened up new vistas that came through viewing outer space through the Hubble telescope. I came to understand a fuller story of Creation as told through both our telescopes and microscopes. I began to realise that we are now in a position to understand the origin and process, out of which the universe has emerged; and with it the solar system, Planet Earth, all of life and the human as well.

Awareness began to dawn for me that there are critical environmental issues facing us, like climate change, deforestation, global-warming and waste management. Miriam warned us that if we do not address these issues, we are walking towards a "cliff". I experienced that image as being very serious for myself and the whole universe. How right she was. I am among many who are coming to know and embody this new understanding of what it means to be human, to be in relationship with Earth, and the whole community of life.

This was a transforming time in my life. Since then, I have been trying to grasp and understand the whole area of Creation spirituality and its implications for my life, the life of our Congregation and communities, within the whole community of life.

### **Spiritual Nourishment**

There has been a wonderful revival of Celtic Spirituality in Ireland over the past number of years. Celtic spirituality is alive with this sense of the Presence of God. It fosters a contemplative approach to all creation, bringing with it healing and awareness. We see this in the lives of the Irish saints. One example is St Kevin who went to live in the remote place of Glendalough, to be close to God in nature. One story about Kevin tells us that once while he was praying in his cell on the side of the mountain, with arms outstretched, a blackbird by chance arrived on it and built a nest there. In time, she laid her eggs, the eggs hatched, and eventually the chicks flew away. He made a commitment to keep his arm outstretched because the presence of God in the bird and her chicks was so palpable for him. What an extraordinary story of stillness and contemplation.

Patrick Kavanagh, an Irish poet, was very much aware of this Presence. A few lines in his poem “The One” reveal his contemplative vision:

A humble scene in a backward place  
Where no one important ever looked...  
Prepared to inform the farmers  
That beautiful, beautiful, beautiful God  
Was breathing his love in a cutaway bog

The “cutaway bog” is viewed as being totally useless. Here, Kavanagh finds God’s love even in such a place that would be disregarded by his local, neighbouring farmers.

Celtic Spirituality and Creation Spirituality share the vision of the presence of God visible and invisible in all of creation. It is a spirituality which invites us to stillness and silence, to awareness and to love. The challenge now is to reconnect more deeply with the natural world and find our rightful place within this sacred web. Thomas Berry asks us to “go to the earth as the Source from which we came and ask for its guidance, for the earth carries the psychic structures as well as the physical form of every living being upon the planet” (The Dream of the Earth, Thomas Berry).

Pope Francis gives the same message when he says “The universe unfolds in God, who fills it completely. Hence there is a mystical meaning to be found in a leaf, in a mountain trail, in a dewdrop, in a poor person’s face” (Laudato Si # 233).

### **Bringing it Home**

I live presently on the outskirts of Galway city in a new-build apartment block. When it opened, *Teaghlach Mhuire* was the first non-domestic A-rated building in the country, receiving an award for Sustainable Energy. There are thirty-eight sisters living here, most of us being seniors. Our lives have been turned upside down with the arrival of the Corona virus. Lockdown began for us in March. As the pace of life slowed, I began to embrace a more contemplative stance and spent more time in our beautiful, courtyard garden.



Over time, I became more aware that, despite our award, we didn’t have very many bees and butterflies. Others observed the same, so we did some research. This resulted in our purchasing bee bombs, which are handmade seed balls, made from native wildflower seeds, local clay and sifted compost. They contain eighteen species of wildflowers, all native to Ireland. They grow easily once they have plenty of water and sun. We had some success with their growth and they attracted some more bees. As I mentioned

earlier, I am very much aware of how the number of bees and butterflies is decreasing. The challenge to us is to make pollinator- friendly choices. “Even growing flowers at home to feed bees contributes to this effort,” noted Graziano de Silva – the director of FAO, at World bee day in Rome, May 20<sup>th</sup>, 2020. Next year we will grow more wildflowers and hopefully attract even more bees and butterflies.



One familiar summer sound in my childhood was the distinctive call of the corncrake, a shy, elusive bird. Once a familiar sound on every farm in Ireland, they had suffered a drastic population decline, threatened with global extinction because of intensive farming. However, jubilation, the corncrake's call rings out again! Great news on local newspapers and RTÉ news on July 17<sup>th</sup>, 2020. Due to conservation methods by farmers, the numbers

are on the increase in areas in the West of Ireland – the town of Louisburgh, the island of Inishbofin, County Donegal, and the Shannon Callows in the Midlands. May this good work continue as people grow in awareness of the need to protect our environment.

As I write, lines from Mary Oliver's poem 'When I am among the trees' are with me:

Around me the trees stir in their leaves  
And call out "stay a while"  
The light flows from their branches  
And they call again, "It's simple" they say  
"And you too have come  
Into the world to do this, to go easy, to be filled  
With light and to shine"

Just before lockdown in March the buds were beginning to open. By the time when we could venture out, the chestnut tree sported its flowers as all the trees were in full bloom. Spring energy was flowing abundantly in all of nature and I enjoyed "staying a while" among and with the trees.

### **Amen**

As I come to the end of this piece, I realise the spirituality of Catherine McAuley stirs the leaves of my awareness to continue to grow in the awareness of the Presence of God. One of her sayings "we have one solid comfort amidst all the tripping about; our hearts can always be in the same place, centred in God, for whom alone we go forward or stay back" (letter to deSales White Dec 20<sup>th</sup> 1840) is very encouraging. It supports me in my growth in Spirituality, helping me realise that I am always in the presence of God; that this is my "solid comfort."

I conclude with a blessing from the late John O'Donohue. It encompasses all that I wish to express, and I offer it as a blessing for each of us and for all of creation.

"May you recognise in your life the presence, power and light of your soul. May you recognise that you are never alone, that your soul in its brightness and belonging connects you intimately with the rhythm of the Universe."

-John O Donohue, *Anam Cara*

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