

ECOLOGY

Our common home

– the Earth

This summer has been a hot one and has broken many records. It has been described as a time of crazy heat, fires and floods, and hailed by many as the strongest evidence of climate change to date.

During one of these hottest weeks of the summer I attended a conference in the Vatican, hosted by Pope Francis.

Monica Conmee
attended the *Laudato si*
conference: 'Our Common
Home' in July 2018 hosted
by the Vatican

I'm not sure how many of us grasped the full significance of this new Pope, Jorge Bergoglio taking on the name of a saint from the 12th century, who had responded to the call: 'Go and repair my home, which,

as you can see, lies in ruins.' Now eight centuries later his namesake, Pope Francis, is at the forefront of a global movement to repair our common home, the earth.

Laudato si

Three years ago Pope Francis wrote a landmark encyclical, critiquing consumerism and irresponsible development, lamenting environmental degradation and global warming, and calling all people of the world to take 'swift and unified global action'. This document was welcomed by governments, institutions, faith communities, environmental bodies and businesses the world over. The encyclical, *Laudato si*, gave a clarion call:

'I urgently appeal then for a new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet, we need a conversation which includes everyone... all of us can cooperate as instruments of God for the care of creation, each according to his or her own culture, experience, involvement and talents.' (*Laudato si* 4)

Three years on, a great alliance and network of people passionate about protecting the environment gathered together, recognising we need do more to up our game before the game is up.

The conference entitled *Laudato si: 'Saving our Common Home and the future of life on Earth'* was not your typical Vatican conference, but an opportunity to dialogue and understand what is happening to our planet, to share best practice on how things can change for the good of people and the earth, and a chance to plan concrete actions, including ways we can lead by example.

Over the two days we followed the *See, Judge, Act* process on which *Laudato Si* is based:

See: Through input from scientists, economists, business experts and indigenous communities, we looked at the impact of the challenges facing our planet today. This is described in *Laudato si* as 'listening to the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor'.

Judge: Discerning the crisis of our common home and exploring what we can do about it.

Act: Establishing new opportunities and plans to act together to save our common home.

The key aims of the conference were to:

- Raise ambition for the 1.5°C global target
- Promote a transition towards a circular economy: ensuring that global investments are centred on the good of people and the planet, whilst developing an economy of sharing, of communion which puts people and the planet at the centre rather than profit
- Support a greater involvement of faith communities
- Empower a people's movement

I was in awe of the range of people gathered: Cardinals, scientists, religious communities, faith leaders, young people, NGO's, people of all faiths and none, men and women working on the front line of climate change supporting communities most affected by the catastrophic changes that are happening as a result of human activity. Each person had a story to tell of their unwavering commitment to build a better world and to protect our planet. We had a great British delegation: Lord Stern, John Gummer, a representative from the Board of deputies of British Jews, representatives from the Church of England, the UK ambassador to the Holy See, and more.



Photo: Citta Nuova

Indigenous peoples and young people

I felt incredibly privileged to spend time with some inspirational and courageous people, real giants of humanity: indigenous Amazonian leaders who are facing a daily struggle to survive as the Amazon rainforest is pulverised by mining and logging companies; young ‘climate warriors’ from the Marshall islands whose very lives are threatened with extinction in the next few years as sea levels continue to rise; Lord Stern, from LSE, warning us that ‘to delay is dangerous’ and it makes economic sense to do something about saving our planet: ‘The cost of action is much much less than the cost of inaction.’

A particularly powerful testimony came from seventeen year-old Jade Hameister, the youngest person ever to ski both the North and South poles. Whilst in the North Pole she saw that, where the ice cap has melted, the ice thickness has dropped from 3.5 metres to one. Of the South Pole she said: ‘The ice cap broke and prevented us from proceeding, we were wading through the channels that opened before us and on some occasions, we had to carry the sledges on our shoulders.’ She gave an ardent plea: ‘It’s not only our planet: the very survival of the human race is at risk. For the first time in the history of our

species, we have one common threat against which we must all act as one.’

This urgent tone was echoed with every speaker’s contribution given the accumulation of scientific evidence regarding issues such as biodiversity loss, plastic pollution, and climate change.

Holistic perspectives

What was significant in this meeting was that the discussions attempted to look at the challenges around justice and the environment in a holistic way, rather than as separate entities. This enabled us to hear ‘both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor’ (LS, 49). These discussions gave the opportunity to understand more deeply the impact of what is happening already because of a changing climate. People from all corners of the world spoke of food shortage, water scarcity, homes lost and families having to migrate due to drought and fighting over diminishing natural resources. Again, and again the stories shared, illustrated that it is the poorest people throughout the world who are suffering most because of our changing climate – yet it is they who have done the least to cause it.

FAMILY

An audience with Pope Francis

The highlight of the conference was the audience with Pope Francis and the chance to personally greet him. He was on ‘holiday’ during that period when he doesn’t usually have audiences. I’m sure he was keen to meet the conference delegates as he saw all present as *his* people, part of a growing mass-movement working together to stop the imminent destruction of our planet.

We gathered in the Sala Clementina, a 16th century hall, full of renaissance splendour. I was fortunate to be near the front as I witnessed this somewhat frail but determined 81-year-old man walk into the hall. As Pope Francis began to speak his frailty vanished as he gave a passionate call to action:

‘Dear brothers and sisters, challenges are not lacking! I express my heartfelt gratitude for your efforts in the service of care for creation and a better future for our children and grandchildren. Sometimes it might seem too arduous a task, since “there are too many special interests, and economic interests easily end up trumping the common good and manipulating information so that their own plans will not be affected” (Laudato si, 54). Yet human beings, while capable of the worst, are also capable of rising above themselves, choosing again what is good, and making a new start... Please continue to work for the radical change circumstances require, for injustice is not invincible.’

Preparing for the COP24 Summit

Speaking of the UN climate negotiations to take place in Poland this December, during which nations will establish their next steps in implementing the Paris climate agreement, Pope Francis said: *‘The COP24 Summit, to be held in Katowice, Poland, in December, could prove a milestone on the path set out by the 2015 Paris Agreement....., governments should strive to honour the commitments made in Paris, in order to avoid the worst consequences of the climate crisis. “Reducing greenhouse gases requires honesty, courage and responsibility, above all on the part of those countries which are more powerful and pollute the most” (ibid., 169), and we cannot afford to waste time.’*

The Pope took his time to meet each of the 400 conference delegates personally. I was amazed to see that he had real presence with each person, greeting each one as if they were the only ones there. I saw no looking down the line to see how many were left to meet, or clockwatching. I heard later that the Pope regards the encounter with each person as a sacramental moment. This really made me think about how, so often, I may be listening to someone

Photo: @courtesyofMonicaConnee



but the thoughts whirling around in my head are taking me far away. I was able to present the Pope with an album of letters from children responding to his appeal in *Laudato si*; he seemed thrilled to receive it!

Later the same day, I had the privilege of being able to address the conference for a few minutes and share the work I have been involved in with CAFOD* to help children and young people understand the connection between what is happening to our planet and how it is impacting on the world’s poorest people.

Walking the talk

Throughout the meeting it was recognised how important it is to lead by example and to ‘walk the talk’. The Vatican was the first to say it was going to increase its efforts to put its own house in order, including a ban on plastic bottles, installing solar panels and charger stations for electric vehicles. During the conference in the Vatican, the Focolare global youth festival: Genfest 2018, was taking place in the Philippines. I felt this was no coincidence, as in some ways, this conference was, for me a ‘grown up Genfest’. All those years ago, I had been inspired by the incredible vision shared at Genfest 1990, that what we *do* makes a difference to others and to our planet, and that we were part of ‘history in the making’ as we worked for a more united and just world. Here I was at the Vatican continuing to work for this challenge. This meeting gave me a renewed passion and commitment to recognise that wherever we live and whoever we are, the ecological and economic crisis touches all of us, but we are not alone in this crisis and our faith gives us strength to work together for the solutions we urgently need. 🍀

* Catholic Action for Overseas Development