

Walking Together for Our Common Home

“The Earth is the Lord’s and everything in it” (Psalm 24)

Climate pilgrimage

Good evening everyone. My name is Jane Mellett. I’m delighted to be here this evening with you all as we walk together for our common home. In 2015, as you are probably aware, Pope Francis published a ground-breaking document on the environment, called “Laudato Si – Care for our common home”.¹ Laudato Si is addressed to “*every single person living on this planet*” because, as Pope Francis says in the opening paragraphs, “*We need a conversation which includes everyone, since the environmental challenge we are undergoing, and its human roots, concern and affect us all.*” (Laudato Si, 1, 14). The climate & extinction crisis is an issue that crosses all boundaries, affecting the home we all share, Our Common Home. And that is why we are here this evening, walking together for our common home.

I’m no stranger to walking pilgrimages and I’m a firm believer that walking is one of the most transformative things you can do. This time last year I joined a group of pilgrimage walking from Italy to Poland to the UN Climate Change Conference (known as COP24). I spent forty days walking 1,000km with this inspirational group of people from the Philippines, various European countries and the USA. Our group included Christians of various denominations, seekers, activists, believers and non-believers. The aim of our pilgrimage was to carry the message of Laudato Si to the UN Conference. We walked through seven countries, in Winter, endured every type of weather you could imagine, yet it was an incredible journey.²

Amongst our group were Filipino survivors of Super Typhoon Haiyan, and it is their story I wish to share with you this evening. Typhoon Haiyan struck the Philippines in November 2013. It was one of the strongest storms ever recorded to make landfall in human history, killing 10,000 people in two hours and displacing almost 14 million people. Its strength is attributed to the warmer waters it travelled over in the Pacific Ocean; an issue fuelled by the

¹ http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html

² See www.climatepilgrimage.com

climate crisis. My friend and fellow pilgrim, Joanna Sustento, lost her entire family that night as her parents, her brother, her sister-in-law and three-year-old nephew were carried away by the storm surge. Joanna's story is one of millions worldwide who are suffering the disastrous consequences of the climate crisis. I tell you this story today because Joanna is for me, the face of the environmental crisis. We hear lots of statistics and reports these days about climate change and they can be overwhelming, but Joanna represents the real people, the real families, the real grief behind the statistics. Super Typhoons are the new norm for the Philippines and for many countries where Trocaire works. For these people, the climate crisis is not a question of a minor disruption to one's life, it is a matter of life and death.³

Walking & Hospitality

Every night on our journey we were hosted by local communities, greeted by school students, parishioners, Bishops, Mayors, Presidents, UN officials and thousands of people along the road. In these spaces we were treated so warmly, our every need met. We enjoyed the best of food, warm places to sleep, somewhere to rest and recharge our bodies. The conversations were not always easy, as this is a crisis which ultimately will affect the lifestyles of people all across the world, it can be challenging for some to hear. Yet still, each meal we shared felt like a very special communion, especially when someone opened their home to complete strangers on the road. We relied on their generosity which encouraged me to be grateful every day for all that we received; it helped to melt away any insecurities I might have carried on the road. We were reminded many times of a quote from Henri Nouwen: *"Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place."*

Walking in Solidarity

There is something very transformative about walking. Jesus walked everywhere, so did St. Francis. When you walk, you engage on a different level with nature, with local people and changing landscapes. You begin to see the effects of our lifestyles on this fragile planet, especially when journeying

³ You can hear more of Joanna's tragic story in this 'Democracy Now' interview which can be accessed here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y9DJlbiHgvc>

through coal mining regions where the air quality is so bad, people are breathing the equivalent of seven cigarettes a day. A big learning for me on this pilgrimage was the fact that less than 100 fossil fuel companies in the world are responsible for 70% of the problem in our atmosphere⁴. Even though families in these towns have been coal mining for generations, they admit that now the future lies elsewhere, in more sustainable, clean energy. We learned from each other and from each community we rested in, from our difficulties, injuries, pain and from our joyful celebrations and communions.

Reading from Rebecca Solnit's wonderful book recently I understood these words on a much deeper level: *"Walking, ideally, is a state in which the mind, the body and the world are aligned, as though they were three characters finally in conversation together, three notes suddenly making a chord."*⁵

Christian Hope

Our Christian faith teaches us 'Love of neighbour' and that demands that we do not sit back and accept injustice. It calls each of us to do something, whatever we can, where ever we are. The founder of this Climate Pilgrimage, Yeb Saño, frequently reminded us on our journey that, "Our physical destination is COP24, but our real destination is the minds and hearts of all those we meet on this road." Ultimately this pilgrimage was about **transformation**. It became clear that one's destination is never really a place but **a new way of seeing things**.

In Laudato Si too, Pope Francis reminds us that it is in our hearts that the real eco-conversion must take place, the roots of this crisis are deeply spiritual. We have forgotten who we are and where we come from. We need to reconnect with nature, with the awesome beauty that is around us, and to see everything, *"water, soil, mountains, people... All as a caress of God"* (LS, 84). He talks of Christ present in all living things, even in the tiniest speck of dust on our planet. Like in our Gospel reading today, we are being urged to pay attention. Jesus says, *"Consider, the lilies of the field"* (Matthew 6:25-34). Consider. Pay attention. Re-connect with this web of life. Really **SEE** this earth which is the Lord's (Psalm 24), because we will only fight for what we love. This

⁴ See <https://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/2017/jul/10/100-fossil-fuel-companies-investors-responsible-71-global-emissions-cdp-study-climate-change> for more details and links to relevant reports.

⁵ Solnit, Rebecca, *Wanderlust – A History of Walking*, Granta Books, 2014.

re-awakening to the created world, should affect everything for us, how we pray, how we do liturgy, how we interact with one another and with the world's resources.

We all have very serious choices to make as a global community and to be honest, we don't have time for despair! What Christian faith communities bring into this conversation is **HOPE**. This hope is not a hope that encourages apathy or indifference, but it is a hope that we know things can change, we know that there is a better path and we must walk this path. Ultimately this crisis will be solved at the grassroots and faith leaders and faith communities have a pivotal role to play in this.

Carry the Lantern

As we continue our walk this evening, I ask you to focus at some point on the lantern bearers. We are all being called to bring light into this dark crisis, to lead by example in our churches, to be light bearers wherever we are, however we can. With the encouragement and support of organisations like Eco-congregation Ireland, Trócaire, Christian Aid and Tearfund, churches can reduce their energy use, cut down on waste, providing habitats for birds and insects, cutting out plastics and teaching their members to value and protect God's creation. Most importantly we must lobby our politicians in whatever way we can and pray. Pray for world leaders. Pray for the UN climate talks which take place for the 25th time in Madrid this December. Pray that we all have the courage to do what is right.

In Laudato Si Pope Francis asks us: "*What kind of world do we want to leave to those coming after us, to children who are now growing up?*" (LS, 160). This question of intergenerational justice is now being put to us by the young people of our world who are taking to the streets to ask us the same question. They demand a future not a mess. On Friday next, November 29th, the next climate strikes will happen around the world. We will be there with a group called FaithS for Climate Action, gathering in an interfaith prayer before the protest at 12 noon, at the Merrion Sq. Park Sculpture and you are all most welcome to join us. Bring your banners and your voices and join in solidarity with young people around the world who demand change.

So, you don't have to walk 1,000km to embark on this climate journey, you'll be pleased to hear. But we all do need to make a journey of the heart where our relationship with the environment is concerned. I urge you to join this climate journey. What we do has an impact. How we live has an impact. We start with ourselves. Develop a hunger for climate justice.

“All is not lost. Human being, while capable of the worst, are also capable of rising above themselves and choosing again what is good, making a new start...Let us sing as we go. May the struggles and concern for this planet, never take away the joy of our hope.” (Laudato Si, 205)