

LESS IS MORE

The village of Kiltegan is situated close to the Wicklow hills 45 miles (60 km) south of Dublin. Near the village is the house which was gifted to Father Whitney and his companions when they were establishing St Patrick's Missionary Society in 1932. This became the headquarters of the Society for the next 85 years—until our leadership team moved to Nairobi in Kenya two years ago. Wherever I was living and working as a missionary I, like all of our priests, saw Kiltegan as my home base—and I always made sure to come there for a longer or shorter time whenever I was in Ireland.

The main purpose of each visit was, of course, to meet with our leaders and to renew my friendship with other members of the Society. But for me there was always an extra bonus. My visit gave me an opportunity to go down to the basement of the old house where I would invariably find a rather odd kind of treasure-trove. This consisted of clothes, books, vestments, and a whole assortment of useful items, most of which had been bequeathed to the Society, mainly by Irish priests who had died. If I was coming from the tropical climate of Africa I was likely to have the satisfaction of finding a heavy hand-knitted woollen Aran sweater, or a jacket or overcoat that would keep me warm in Ireland. I might even find a warm trousers that fitted me once I had cut about twelve inches (30 cm) off the legs. (I'm still the smallest member of our Society and for many years I've only been growing outwards rather than upwards!) Sometimes I'd find a radio or tape-recorder that was still in good working order.

For those of us who had been working among very poor people in remote parts of the world the advantage of getting these items for free wasn't just a matter of saving money. It also helped to ease our consciences when we found ourselves living in a country where most people take it for granted that they have a range of clothes and electronic goods that would be beyond the wildest dreams of many of the people among whom we had been living and working.

ENVIRONMENTAL PROBLEMS

Nowadays I have another and even more important reason for being content with clothes or other goods which others no longer use—and even getting real satisfaction and enjoyment from doing so. It has to do with what's happening to our environment. In recent years we have become more aware of the urgent ecological problems that our world is experiencing.

The lifestyle all of us in the better-off countries of the world—our burning of so much coal, peat, oil and gas as well as our use of cars and the increase of the number of cattle—has released so much carbon and other damaging gases into the atmosphere that our world has become a hothouse. Year by year world is getting hotter and this is causing very serious changes in the climate. The present-day frenzy of buying and discarding, stimulated by the advertising industry, has not only brought about damaging changes in the weather. It has also used up precious irreplaceable resources and created an enormous problem of waste—the fish in our oceans being poisoned by tiny fragments of plastic, and our rivers and lakes polluted with chemicals.

A POPE WHO CARES FOR THE EARTH

Pope Francis is keenly aware of these ecological problems. He knows that it is not just that we are not caring for our Earth, but that we are actually destroying it. The world we are leaving to our children and grandchildren is one where whole countries in the Pacific will be covered by the rising ocean, where farmland will be turned into desert, where storms and hurricanes will be far more serious and frequent, and where thousands of species of animals will be wiped out. Furthermore, Francis reminds us that already today the poorest people on earth are suffering dreadful hardships as a result of global warming. In his great document on the environment he begs us to 'hear both the cry of the Earth and the cry of the poor' (*Laudato Si'* paragraph 49).

In one of the most striking passages of this document Francis says: 'We need to take up an ancient lesson, found in different religious traditions and also in the Bible. It is the conviction that "less is more"' (*LS 222*). He says that a truly Christian spirituality is one where we are 'capable of deep enjoyment free of the obsession with consumption.' Looking back on my own experience I know that I get 'deep enjoyment' from finding a use for other people's unwanted clothes or other goods, rather than buying new things. And I know that many other people also find how right Pope Francis is when he says that 'less is more'. Francis goes on to say:

A constant flood of new consumer goods can baffle the heart and prevent us from cherishing each thing and each moment. To be serenely present to each reality, however small it may be, opens us to much greater horizons of understanding and personal fulfilment. Christian spirituality proposes a growth marked by moderation and the capacity to be happy with little. It is a return to that simplicity which allows us to stop and appreciate the small things, to be grateful for the opportunities which life affords us ... and not to succumb to sadness for what we lack. (*LS 222*)

PRACTICAL ACTIONS

Francis is not content to spell out this spirituality of moderation in general terms. He also lists various practical ways in which we can play our part in modelling a style of living which shows care for the Earth. He suggests 'avoiding the use of plastic and paper, reducing water consumption, separating refuse, cooking only what can reasonably be consumed, showing care for other living beings, using public transport or car-pooling, planting trees, turning off unnecessary lights' (*LS 211*).

Each of these actions may seem small in comparison with the huge problems we face. But Francis does not agree. He says:

We must not think that these efforts are not going to change the world. They benefit society, often unbeknown to us, for they call forth a goodness which, even though unseen, inevitably tends to spread. Furthermore, such actions ... can enable us to live more fully and to feel that life on earth is worthwhile (*LS 212*).

However, Francis also insists that such action by individuals is not enough. We must also work for major change in politics both at the national level and at the international level. This means that we must put pressure on our politicians to adopt a truly sustainable model of development—one that respects nature

rather than exploiting it. There are two key elements in this. The first is that we must quickly phase out our reliance on coal, oil, and gas; our energy must come instead from renewable solar and wind energy and other sources of energy which do not cause climate change and environmental pollution (*LS* 165). The second necessary change is equally radical: we in the wealthier parts of the world must accept that 'the time has come to accept decreased growth ... in order to provide resources for other places to experience healthy growth' (*LS*, 193). Our governments must abandon the present policy of having ever-increasing production of more and more goods—and increasing the numbers of cattle. For we in the Western world have already used up far more than our fair share of the resources of the Earth, and have been the main cause of the huge ecological problems which we are creating for people in poorer countries and for our own children.

CHANGING OUR MENTALITY

Political changes are unlikely to take place unless we succeed in bringing about a change of our mentality—transforming the way we look at the world around us. In his Peace Message for 2014, Francis said: 'So often we are driven by greed and by the arrogance of dominion, possession, manipulation and exploitation; we do not preserve nature.' He asks that we should respect nature and see it as 'a gracious gift which we must care for and set at the service of our brothers and sisters, including future generations.'

A key way to bring about such a change of mentality is to encourage children and their parents to take time to really *look* in wonder at trees, flowers and scenery—to be fascinated, even captivated, both by their beauty and by their extraordinary complexity and aliveness. Our sense of wonder can be enormously increased if we bring a high-powered magnifying glass with us in order to see the extraordinary detail in even the simplest flower—detail which is invisible to the naked eye. If we allow ourselves to become lost in wonder at nature we will commit ourselves to caring for the Earth.