

Caring for the Earth

John Scally speaks with Fr. Gearóid Ó Conaire, OFM the former Executive Secretary of Justice Peace and the Integrity of Creation Commission of the USG/UISG (International Union of Superiors General). He is currently based in Dublin.

What is your personal commitment to Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation?

When I arrived as a deacon at the age of 27 in El Salvador in 1984, the civil war was still going on. The next day, I was taken around the parish. Many people in the area had recently been displaced by fighting in the countryside. At one stage we noticed a crowd of people gathered near a dump. We approached the silent crowd. They were looking up at a semi-naked dead man hanging on a tree, with obvious signs of torture. At the dump I was unaware that the mother of the victim was present, unable to claim her son's body because of fear of reprisal. As I prayed that night and reflected on my first day in El Salvador, I committed myself to doing all in my power to try to prevent such a thing happening to at least one other human being.

The expression 'Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation' encapsulates for me **the call to live in right relations** with myself, with others, especially those who are poor, with the whole of Creation and ultimately with God.

What are the signs of the times for religious congregations today?

It is almost impossible to give a comprehensive answer. There are so many issues. The 'signs of the times' also has to do with what is happening in the Church, within religious life and between Churches and other Faiths. I will limit my reflection to describing some 'ad extra signs' that are challenging the quality of life for all and some other 'ad intra signs' inviting a response. In any process, we first need to establish what the 'REALITY' is communicating. As Christians we believe that God's Spirit is moving in and through all the unfolding events of history.

The Council document, *Gaudium et Spes* (no. 4) states that 'At all times the Church carries the responsibility of reading the signs of the times and interpreting them in the light of the Gospel.' This phrase is found in one place only in the New Testament. The Gospel of St Matthew (16:1-3), states: 'The Pharisees and the Sadducees came, and to test him, asked him to show them a sign from heaven. He answered them, "When it is evening, you say "it will be fair weather; for the sky is red." And in the morning, 'It will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening.' You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky but you cannot interpret the signs of the times.

The International Community have proposed 8 Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)¹ to tackle poverty and exclusion by 2015, which are increasingly unlikely to be

met. These goals address the fundamental right of every human being to adequate income, shelter, food, health care, education and security. The goals aim to ensure gender equality, universal education and environmental sustainability for all. Many religious Institutes are using these goals as a framework for their pastoral planning in favour of the common good.

There are as many issues of interest as there are people present. From my experience, if we deepen in any single issue we discover a web of connections between it and all social and environmental justice issues. I would like to remind you briefly of some pressing issues: Economic Globalization and the Growth Illusion, Food Security and Hunger, Migration and Human Trafficking, HIV/AIDS, Climate Change and Biodiversity loss before looking at what Religious Institutes might be able to offer.

Richard Douthwaite, an English environmental economist living in Mayo, demonstrates in his book, *The Growth Illusion*, that uncontrolled growth, which began with the Industrial Revolution and has intensified in the last hundred years, is linked to increased consumption of fossil fuels. Like a cancerous cell, economic growth is consuming and disfiguring its host.

Douthwaite argues that ending the pursuit of 'economic growth at all costs' holds out the best hope for the survival of our ecosystems. He believes that it should not be the function of the market to decide a vision or direction of society. The market needs to be subservient to the common good and not vice versa.

What is the particular contribution of Religious Life to these challenges?

In the light of so many and difficult challenges, many of which are too complicated for us to involve ourselves in, we need to clarify our particular contribution.

At the United Nations Climate Change Conference (UNCCC) in Nairobi it became clear to me and increasingly too many of the delegates that if the focus continued to be kept on looking for technical solutions to resolve problems without dealing with the underlying spiritual and ethical causes no progress would be made. Pope John Paul II in a famous document written on the World Peace Day, 1990, 'Peace with God the Creator, Peace with all Creation', said that environmental destruction 'lays bear the depth of man's moral crisis'. He also said that Christian responsibility within creation and duty towards nature 'are an essential part of their faith' (#15).

Yet, at these international conferences it is rare to hear a mention of these dimensions. More than ever, as religious and priests, we need to highlight these dimensions. Challenge people to keep the bigger picture in mind.

On Hard Talk on the BBC I heard an interview with the Singaporean ambassador to the United Nations. He had just published a book. He is obviously a very intelligent man. He never raised the question of 'limits'; never questioned the present market system and

never once raised the question of how could 6-10 billion people hope to achieve a 'middle-class' lifestyle within the carrying capacity of the planet.

Our role will increasingly be to have a better overall knowledge of issues affecting the quality of life of the whole 'Earth Community' in order to help others understand them. A vital contribution is one of encouraging people to reflect on their COSMOVISION or worldview. A materialist Cosmovision, that sees Earth and people as a collection of objects and values them in terms of their utility, has seriously undermined relations between peoples and the sustainability of the planet. The crisis cries out for a different Cosmology; one so powerfully expressed in the Canticle of Creatures of St. Francis, in which the fraternal nature of creation and all creatures is poetically expressed.

How would you define an ecological worldview?

This view sees the human person as an integral part of creation. When we appreciate that we are related to all other creatures, that we are kin with them – their relatives; brothers and sisters - it moves us to a new type of relationship, one of respect and responsibility. Once we see ourselves as part of a bigger picture and not as the only 'actors in the play' we can move away from a domination and control posture towards one of cooperation and reciprocity in our relationship to the Earth and its creatures. The ecological worldview focuses on the interdependence and interconnectedness of all living and non-living systems on our planet. This is a biocentric and not an anthropocentric world view. The question in relation to any plan, cause, issue or programme for the person living out of this perspective becomes one of "what is good for the total community of life and not just humans?" It does not diminish the centrality of the human nor the value of the human person. The realization begins to emerge that humanity cannot be saved in isolation from the Earth community. Earth is no longer the background, but the context. There can only be a viable human economy within Earth's economy, an effective human education system if the Earth first educates and a human spirituality if there is Earth spirituality. This incarnational ecological worldview opens one up to the sacred within everyone and everything. We realize that we cannot know our own story unless we know Earth's story. We realize that we have emerged out of the earth and we resonate at our deepest level when we re-connect with our Mother. Earth is a sacred place and I am part of that sacredness. The struggle for each of us is to spend more time in this worldview, although many contradictions will continue to last, despite our new-found consciousness.

How would you sum up or paraphrase the most important insight you have in your life?

One of my fellow Irish friars in El Salvador shared that developing right relations was the most important contribution he could make to Mission. It is about living and facilitating relationship: with oneself, with others, with the poor with creation and ultimately with God. Most problems originate due to a breakdown in right relations. A lot of difficulty begins with an inability to love and accept oneself. The more 'hurt' or 'pained' a person

is, the greater the likelihood is that he/she will hurt or cause pain to others. Healing relationships is central to the missionary vocation. The challenge, however, is to realize this and to begin our own journey back to wholeness and healing.

Autism is a lifelong developmental disability. Some are able to live relatively 'everyday' lives; others will require a lifetime of specialist support.

People with autism have 3 areas of difficulty: social communication, social **interaction** **social imagination (knowing** what others know and think). Jean Vanier, founder of l'arch community, believes we are all 'wounded' in some way.

The Autistic syndrome highlights a more generalized phenomenon in our world today, an inability to relate in a healthy and significant way to oneself, to others, to creation and ultimately to God. We are all to a greater or lesser degree autistic: preferring fixed daily routines; becoming dependent on rules and uncomfortable with change.

What are the issues that you feel are pivotal 'attitudes' that we need to develop or strengthen if we are going to constructively face the challenges in the world and in the Church today?

The first is contemplation which ultimately is about listening, becoming aware. It is a way of being in the world rather than a way of avoiding the world. It is the way to be present to ourselves, to other, to creation and to the God of all. Do we really know how to listen? Most of us don't listen well. If we don't listen we can't hear – ourselves, others, creation and ultimately God.

Increasingly we are too busy, too stressed and too tired to dedicate quality time to the other. Most of us, in fact, addicts. An addiction is anything that controls us, either consciously or unconsciously, deadening our ability to focus and be attentive, not only to the other, but equally to our own real needs. Gerald May, if my memory serves me correctly, defines an addiction as an attachment to something (person, an idea, a thought, a project, a feeling, dream, etc), possibly even good in itself, which mistakenly substitutes for what leads to fulfilment and happiness. Through a series of unhealthy attachments we loose touch with our true selves and ultimately with God.

From 1984 until 1998 I lived in an inserted fraternity and worked as a Parish Priest and Formator on the outskirts of the San Salvador, El Salvador. They were exciting times, influenced by Mons. Romero's vision of lay participation (Vatican II); a way of living the triple ministry of Jesus, including the social, economic and political dimensions, despite violence and poverty.

One of the big lessons I learned about listening or rather about 'not listening' was when two friends from Ireland came to visit. They both were doing MA's in Mater Dei. After a

stressful day on our way back to my house, walking ahead with brisk determination, one of the women shouted, 'you're very tense aren't you!' I whisked around and uttered a blunt 'No, I'm not!' Her words rang in my ear until I had to admit she was right. The more I accepted that I was stressed the more release I began to experience. I suppose you could say this was the beginning of a process of learning to 'listen to myself', which I have tried to build on, not very successfully, since. I had been forcing myself to respond to tremendous challenges – culture, language, war, responsibility for a huge parish at a young age – and expected that I 'should' be able for it all. I was afraid to admit that much of it was upsetting me or causing me great difficulties. I just was just keeping my head down and hoping that I would come out the far side. This 'insight' let me to become more proactive about 'looking after myself' at every level to better be able to serve the people.

As part of this process I realized I need to find time to be alone. Every few months I would go to a hermitage. The first signs my body was relaxing was when I noticed my nails growing. This moving apart became a very important mechanism for renewing my spiritual and physical batteries. When I returned to parish and fraternal life I noticed a few recurring phenomenon: more present to myself, more present to people; more efficient and got more work done.

Most people just want to be heard. They solve their own problems. Many of us tend to jump in with unhelpful suggestions. This is mostly because we are uncomfortable with silence and think we are expected to give solutions. Some studies have found that a compassionate listener can have an even greater healing influence on a person than a professional with all the techniques but no heart. This statement does not negate the importance of a professional approach to helping and supporting people with problems, but merely points out, the simple but not so obvious requirement, the most important ingredient in any healing relationship, that is, love and care for the other.

During the war I experienced many shocking things and accompanied many traumatized people. In fact, in Salvador post-war violence is even more intense.

Some fellow friars have Post-Traumatic-Stress Syndrome (PTSS) which can cause serious anxiety and physical illnesses. With professional help some have worked through the pain, successfully integrating it into their lives. Others have chosen to leave things as they are. I tend to believe that if we don't deal with something now, as we get older it will deal with us. I can only presume that many missionaries, unknowingly, suffer from Post Traumatic Stress syndrome. Unresolved issues not only affect me, but generally have negative consequences for those we live with and to whom we minister. Many superiors and community members are unaware of PTSS. Now opportunities are available for healing. However, we need to collectively take measures to prepare for and deal with the causes and symptoms of PTSS and other related illness arising from our Vocation as missionaries, if we want to be free to spread the good news of liberation and freedom to others, particularly the poor.

CORI organizes sessions to increase awareness on how missionary life affects us and provide support. A lot of work still needs to be done to accept that reaching out for help is normal and that ultimately we all need spaces for healing.

Do we need to develop a Contemplative Stance?

Karl Ranher once said ‘the Christian of the future will be a mystic or he will not exist at all.’ I think that he intuited what is most essential for human well-being. Openness and communion with the source of life brings healing and peace to the world.

The modern person needs to develop a ‘contemplative stance’. At the heart of the western mentality is a dichotomy between mind and body, spirit and matter, contemplation and action.

As missionaries we tend to consider ourselves activists for the Kingdom. We may pray individually, with our fellow missionaries and with the people, but are we ‘contemplatives’? Michael Mc Cabe SMA believes that one of the challenges for Missionaries today is to develop a contemplative spirituality. Unless the apostolic activity is helped by a ‘profound listening to the Spirit’ it can lead to ‘activism and arrogance’ which has marred the modern missionary movement.

The ‘contemplative stance’ is about becoming aware of the presence of God’s spirit within and around us – in all the activities, ups and downs of our lives and the lives of others. The contemplative does not confine God to a chapel, to a sacrament, to a church, or any place in particular. The contemplative learns to feel for the movement of God’s spirit in the ordinary and extraordinary events of his/her life and in the events of the world around him/her. The contemplative does not just depend on specific prayer times to be with God, although s/he is faithful to these times, but realizes that the times apart are really moments of preparation to meet God in the unexpected and the ordinary events of life. The contemplative realizes that prayer really is all about listening and not about asking. It is about searching for orientation through the maze of life and its challenges.

The contemplative is conscious of developing an ever deeper relationship with God, rather than just working for God. It is not sufficient just to believe in a loving God and to go out and serve Him/Her by telling everyone about this God. For years, I found my relationship with God was like living in the same house, but in a different room. I then realized that God wanted to be in the same room as me. My service to others needed to originate from a loving relationship. It is easy to loose the focus of our Christian and religious vocation. Because of the objective and task driven western culture now dominating our world, it is harder to notice ourselves falling into this frame of mind.

The great spiritual men and women of history seemed to be shaped by the will and way of God than by any other factor in their lives, including culture. The saint allows God’s Spirit to possess them and work through them for a more just, loving and peaceful world. They recongize ‘success’ as God’s and ‘failure’ as their own. They are deeply conscious of the ‘giftedness’ of everything and their utter dependence, not only on God, but on

other people and other creatures. They may be fearful but, like Mons. Romero, are not afraid to take necessary risks for the Kingdom.

Explain more please this readiness to act idea?

They are like spiders waiting to pounce. The spider waits motionless, apparently asleep, until a fly lands on the web. In an instant he pounces into action. This highlights the difference between actively waiting and passivity. A lot of our apostolic initiatives are born more out of our own personal needs than Spirit led. We are impatient for 'success'.

Are you bringing together the Activist and Contemplative?

To be a contemplative does not mean doing less, but initiating it from a different space within and with a different mentality. The activist works for and serves God while the contemplative also works for and serves God, but is constantly in touch with the source of his/her inspiration on the journey. The contemplative learns to increasingly consecrate more of his life to God, even the most ordinary and mundane activities. They just don't move from A to B but, while moving towards the objective, is conscious of significant things happening on the journey. The contemplative learns to live in the NOW. Yes, they have a focus for the future, but that does not interfere with being present to people and events.

What is your exhortation to religious in this respect?

As missionaries we really need to work on developing a contemplative approach to life and ministry: realizing that the most effective way to serve the Kingdom is by allowing God's Spirit to work in and through us rather than wanting to be protagonists. The ultimate success of anything we are involved in does not depend on our efforts alone. This will have a profound affect on the way we treat and work with others, especially the laity and people of other faith traditions. The ideal is to become like Mary and John the Baptist, both of whom were willing to move into the background and to keep the focus on Christ. The contemplative teaches us to strive but also helps us to know when 'let go'. To be 'successful' pastors, leaders and spiritual directors the old proverbial wisdom of 'dying to self' is essential.

Do we need a facilitated processes for dialogue?

I believe that most of us need help to listen at all the different levels. We need some sort of personal guidance. This may be provided in a formal way by a spiritual director or an informal way by a good friend, one who says what needs to be, said when it needs to be said. Many superiors or coordinators of religious communities are not able to create space for dialogue. This is an important characteristics for leadership today; an ability to create space for listening and dialogue. Not everyone has the gift for this, but at least leaders need to recognize the need for it. I have lived in some dysfunctional communities. Dysfunctional behaviour and negative consequences intensify when appropriate space is unavailable for dialogue and sharing.

A Franciscan friend working in Colombia told me a wonderful story that illustrates an ideal towards which I believe we need to be moving together as brothers on a gospel

journey. He lives and works with an indigenous group of people. He does not yet speak their language. The criterion that governs many of our decisions is one of efficiency and 'success'. He recounted how one of the young Indian men used invite him to walk with him. He both usually ended up sitting on the bank of a river in silence, sometimes for more than an hour. At first the friar was uncomfortable, but stayed as he didn't want to offend the young Indian. At a certain stage the young man would simply just stand up, make a gesture of thanksgiving and walk away. For me the story points to something that many cultures, including our own, that is, the ability to really be present to someone else and feel comfortable, without having to say anything.

I know conflict transformation is one of your big ideas?

What do you think of when you hear the word "conflict"? If you are like me, you think of pain, worry, difficulty, stress, division, silence, ignoring, and defensiveness and so on. It came as a pleasant surprise for me to discover that, in fact, conflict is necessary for growth and in itself is neither negative nor positive, but depends on how we deal with it.

Conflict is normal. If we try to ignore conflicts in the hope that they will go away, or fail to deal constructively with them, violence inevitably ensues. We have choices. We all need to develop skills to deal better with conflict at every level.

Conflict is nothing new to the Church. There are many examples of conflict in the New Testament, not least between Peter and Paul. Mt 18: 15-22 gives an indication on how to deal with and transform conflict. We are encouraged to go directly and speak with the person before we bring in outside help. Conflict between individuals usually has wider negative consequences for the community, unless it is dealt with constructively.

Many different models exist to help deal with conflict between people and groups. From a Christian perspective, the emphasis needs to be on the 'transformation' of the conflict and bringing healing. We first need to be convinced and believe that there are transformational possibilities inherent in every conflict, whether between individuals, communities, ethnic groups or nations. We all know of conflicts that seem to be intractable.

How do we involve ourselves in conflict transformation?

This is not the place to examine in detail the dynamics of conflict as such, but rather to encourage religious to re-commit themselves to working for conflict transformation where they are present.

To be effective 'instruments of peace and healing' we need to become the message by dealing constructively with conflict in our lives. The long-term impact of our pastoral initiatives as individuals and as a group of religious will depend on the quality of our relationships. They say that 70% of communication is non-verbal. What is happening on the inside is transmitted to the outside. Our 'inner ecology' has consequences for 'the outer ecology'.

A loving person has a much better chance to be effective in transforming conflict. The people can identify those who love them, despite these people's personal weaknesses and failures. No amount of techniques can substitute for efforts made to grow in love, concern, respect and solidarity with others.

Getting to know yourself must be important to this process?

St. Teresa said that we cannot know God if we don't come to know ourselves. Self-knowledge is a fundamental part of the spiritual journey. They say that our basic personality is fairly set by three years of age. There are many useful schools of thought and techniques to help us know ourselves better. The important thing is that we embark on the journey. It seems clear that unless we learn to get in touch with our own inner state and learn to express it in healthy ways, it is unlikely we will be able to connect emotionally with others. We need to learn to listen to this part of ourselves in order to be able to listen to the other. When we know the dynamics underlying our personality: our compulsions, our fears, likes, dislikes, prejudices, etc., it will help us to understand and be a lot more tolerant of the other with his or her personality. To be effective mediators and to contribute to conflict transformation and healing we have to be working on ourselves, otherwise unresolved issues are communicated. For these reason counsellors, spiritual directors and mediators are advised to undergo constant supervision. They are not readily available in Mission areas. However, it is not adequate enough to wait for Sabbaticals. Home leave needs to be examined as a time, not only to relax physically but also to strengthen other dimensions of our being.

Is this a community processes?

In Central America we took three days away at the beginning of the year. As part of the three days we spent time getting to know one another. What we found is that collectively working on getting to know one another had positive impacts on our life together and for our work with the people.

Many of us tend to use what is called a 'position based model' to resolve our differences. I have a position and you have a position and we both argue trying to convince the other to accept our position. This is a win/lose model. The so called 'interest-based' bargaining model is more appropriate. Behind every position lies some interest or need. If both people enter into agreement to discover the interests and needs that lie behind their positions and the other's position, it may be possible to mutually agree on solutions that benefit both parties. The goal is to arrive at a win/win situation.

Does this require mediation?

Mediation is one of many techniques available to help transform conflict. Mediation proposes to facilitate dialogue between disputants who voluntarily enter into the process to solve their problems. It helps people focus on issues and move beyond personal antagonisms, hopefully to solve their problems and reach mutually satisfactory agreements. The secret is to know when to use this process. When Rosa Parks decided not to give up her seat to a white person on an Alabama bus in the 1950's, an action of

conscious objection that led to the formation of the civil rights movement and freedom for blacks in the United States, the last thing needed was a mediation process between Rosa and the bus driver! What was needed in this case, and what subsequently evolved with the involvement of Martin Luther King Jr. was non-violent personal action.

Both parties in a dispute must voluntarily agree to participate. Once the need for mediation is recognized, by the parties in conflict or someone else, and both have accepted to participate, some sort of pre-mediation takes place, usually educational in nature. After the introduction and the ground rules have been established, especially not to interrupt one another, both parties are given an opportunity to tell their story. The mediator makes a summary of what has been shared. This indicates that he/she has been listened to. He/She is given an opportunity to add any relevant additional information before the other person is asked to share their story. The mediator identifies common ground and some of the underlying issues, open to comment from the parties in conflict. In a highly charged situation people are generally unable to think and act clearly. Opportunities inevitably arise during the course of these processes for healing strategies to take place. Each person is encouraged to use the "I" word and not to apportion blame. For example, in the case where someone feels deeply hurt because of certain attitudes or actions, this person is given a space to express his/her feelings. The mediator, after having paraphrased what has been expressed, may then ask the person to speak directly to the offending party. The other person is then asked to paraphrase what he/she has heard. The mediator gives lots of time and helps both parties express themselves in a non-judgemental way and to listen to one another. If the mediator feels there is a desire for an apology or some other gesture of reconciliation s/he invites the offending party to express these sentiments.

The final part of the process is the agreement. Based on the proposals elaborated from the interests, concrete actions are written down with timelines, responsibilities and a time to evaluate. Both sides generally sign this document.

Similar processes are used to bring representatives of parties in conflict together, as well as more elaborate and time-consuming processes, which can take more than six months to complete, are used to help entire churches or congregations caught up in serious conflict.

These strategies are increasingly being used. I think it is really worth while for every religious and priest to learn the basic techniques of conflict transformation, useful for many different levels of conflict. This needs to be an obligatory part of our initial and ongoing education. There are many groups who specialize in training church people in these techniques. The Mennonites run regular courses. The Mennonites have a centre in the UK called "Bridge Builders" and can be accessed on the net at: <http://www.menno.org.uk>

Is collaboration central to all of this?

A 'collaborative mentality' is quite rare to find! A lot is spoken about collaboration, but mostly without substance. I came across a good definition:

'Collaboration is a style of performing ministry in a way that is completely based on the identification, release, and union of all the gifts in the Christian community so that the mission of Jesus Christ continues.'

(Loughlan Sofield, ST, Carroll Juliano, SHCJ)

True collaboration is not easily achieved. Sometime collaboration is mistaken for other dimensions of interaction, such as co-existence, communication or cooperation.

Why is collaboration so difficult to accomplish? Basically, it is about 'power sharing'. As clerics we tend not to be good at that. A friar I know, who does wonderful work encouraging participation would say that he was entitled to have 'the final say'. Our Church is hierarchical and gives this 'power' to Parish Priests. So top down process is not unusual. No one disputes that there are situations when someone must decide. However, the process used in taking decisions can either empower participation and creativity or reduce others to mere spectators.

For example the big test for many priests is when a pastoral council decides not to support their project proposal. What do you do? Do you call in the 'I have the final-say card' or do you allow the collective discerning process to take its course?

In moments of such tension we quickly discover how serious we are about promotion of the laity, collaborative ministry and our belief in the collective wisdom. It's easy to be collaborative when everyone agrees with our plan or opinion, but a very different story when something we are 'attached' too is knocked on the head.

Many are calling for collaboration. What are the reasons?

Why is 'collaboration' in vogue? One reason is the fall-off in vocations. Every year the Vatican publish a 'big red book' called the *Annuario Pontificio*. One of the features of this 2,511 page book is statistics on the Universal church. It tells us that: for the first time there are now more Muslims (19.2%) than Catholics (17.4% = 1 billion, 130 million) in the world; that, after years of decline, since 1998 the number of priests has continued to grow, with 600 more now than at the low point, while the number of religious, both men and, particularly women, continues to decline; countries with the lowest numbers of vocations are in Europe (Belgium, France and Holland), while Guadalajara, in Mexico, has the largest number of seminarians per head of population; the fastest growing church is Asian, followed by Africa and then Latin America.

For collaboration to work there needs to be a 'revolution in mentality' and an openness to explore different models of church.

At an international meeting on Peace in the Hague in 2000 I was privileged to hear the chief Rabbi give a presentation. He told us that for most of his ministerial life he gave

95% of his time to the needs of his fellow Jews. The rest was for inter-religious dialogue and collaboration. He had a 'conversion experience' realizing the need for a different focus. Instead of giving the crumbs to others, he began to work using 'collaboration' as the template. The question of collaboration became a central criterion, introduced into all reflections. It became an integral part of his work and the work of his Synagogue.

What are the consequences of not listening?

Pope John Paul II's call for an 'ecological conversion' is really the secular term for 'sustainability'. For the sake of all life supporting ecosystems humanity must learn to live within the 'limits of the earth' and reduce its collective carbon footprint.

Do you have a final thought for religious in this special year?

I am reminded of what a good Franciscan friend, Bro. Ed Dunne, a native of Philadelphia who worked with me in El Salvador, said to me a few months before he died. I visited him in Cabo San Luis in Mexico, on the other side of a very prosperous tourist town, where he was ministering to poor migrant families. We helped build up Basic Christian Communities in Salvador during the civil war. For anyone familiar with community organizing you will appreciate that nothing can substitute personal contact with people. Nearly 15 years later I meet Ed sitting in front of a make-shift dwelling waiting for some folks, whom he had visited earlier that day, to come to pray and reflect together with him. My mind returned to the days of El Salvador and I remembered the difficult and tiring work and wondered would I have the energy and passion to begin again. I shared my doubts with Ed and asked him why, after getting a diagnosis of incurable cancer, he continued to begin again. His reply was immediate. He said that understood his vocation to be a community builder. That gave him energy and a reason to get out of bed in the morning.

Ed was also inspired by Mons. Romero who in September 1978 spoke about the importance of community during his Sunday homily. He said:

What does Christ himself say?

"Where two or three gather in my name, there am I in their midst."

Thank you, Lord.

For where there is community that begins to reflect on your words with religious sincerity, there you are, Christ, the Blessed One, humanity's Liberator.

How my heart is filled with hope by a church where grassroots communities flourish!

I must ask my dear brother priests to make communities flourish everywhere – in neighbourhoods, in villages, among families.

For "where two or three gather in my name," there is the sacramental sign.

Gearoid, thanks for presenting us with such challenging reflections.
