



## Valuing Biodiversity

**Seán McDonagh SSC**, Columban priest and well-known writer on the climate crisis, opens up more of the riches of Pope Francis's *Laudato Si'*. Fr Seán's book, *Robots, Ethics and The Future of Jobs* will shortly be published by Messenger Publications.



Fire Danger Rating in Australia

During 2019 and early 2020, bush fires in Australia, exacerbated by climate change, burnt approximately 18.6 million hectares. The damage to wildlife was horrendous. Three billion koalas, kangaroos and other animals were killed or displaced. Scientists estimate that 2.4 billion reptiles, 180 million birds and 51 million frogs were killed or displaced.

The destruction of biodiversity is having enormous negative impacts both on the planet and on human

wellbeing, as humans continue to colonise and degrade many ecosystems on earth; this can lead to an increase in bats, rats and other animals that harbour diseases which can cause pandemics, such as COVID-19.

It is important that we get an accurate understanding of how serious the destruction of biodiversity is for the planet. In fact, the level of destruction of the biosphere constitutes a change of a geological and biological order of magnitude. During the past few

decades human devastation of nature has caused the end of the Cenozoic era, which began 65 million years ago. We have now entered the Anthropocene or Human Epoch because of the massive changes humans have made on terrestrial and marine ecosystems.

We are living now in the sixth major extinction of life since life began on earth 3.8 billion years ago. The last time something similar happened was at the end of the Mesozoic period 65 million years ago when the dinosaurs were wiped out. As a species we need to educate ourselves about the impact of our wasteful, industrial societies and, most of all we need to urgently devise strategies and lifestyles that will allow us to live in a more sustainable way with the rest of creation. Every group in society, including politicians, economists, industrialists, farmers and religious people will need to be involved. It is a gigantic task, but essential if we are to leave a beautiful, vibrant and fruitful planet to future generations.

Globally insects have been hit most of all by extinction. Over the past decade and a half, 41 per cent of insect species have declined compared with 22 per cent of vertebrate species. Germany is planning to ban floodlights to fight its declining insect population. Also the use of weedkillers and insecticides will be banned in national parks and within five to ten metres of major bodies of water.

Caring for creation is a new challenge for many religious people. In the Catholic Church there was no discussion on the environmental crisis during



the Second Vatican Council in the early 1960s. Many of the bishops who attended subscribed to 'dominion theology,' which believed that the Earth was there to meet human needs. I am convinced that if half the bishops were women, they would have included care for creation as a central element of our Christian faith. Even *Populorum Progressio* (On the Progress of People) taught that creation was there for humans to use for their own advantage (PP, 23). There was no reflection on the negative impact of industrialisation on the biosphere, and to the damage which humans were causing to the natural world. It stated boldly that 'the introduction of industry was necessary for economic growth and human progress: it is also a sign of development and contributes to it. By persistent work and the use of our intelligence we gradually wrest nature's secrets from her and find a better application



for her riches' (PP, 25).

Given this poor leadership the publication of *Laudato Si'* in 2015 was both very welcome and surprising. In quoting from Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople Pope Francis (LS, 9) opens a new morality for humans. The Patriarch said 'for human beings ... to destroy the biological diversity of God's creation; for human beings to degrade the integrity of the earth by causing change in its climate, by stripping the earth of its natural forests or destroying its wetland; for human beings to contaminate the earth's waters, its land, its air and its life – these are sins.'

Even in our liturgy there is an enormous gap between the teaching found in *Laudato Si'* and the prayers we use. For example, in the Roman Missal, which was published in 1570, the post-communion prayer for the Sundays of Advent read as follows: 'Lord, teach

us to despise the things of earth and love the things of heaven'. Prayers such as this are still in use. Regrettably, the lack of concern for creation was not confined to the liturgy. It was also found in the *Salve Regina*, one of our most popular prayers. It refers to the condition of human life as 'mourning and weeping in this valley of tears'. The implications were clear that, if our true home was in heaven and this world was just a valley of tears, all our energies should be devoted to pursuing the development of the interior life, rather than wasting our energies on earthly things, which will pass away.

We need to develop new liturgical texts and eucharist prayers based on the vision of *Laudato Si'*, we need also to encourage the interest of young people in the teaching on the earth of *Laudato Si'*: 'every creature is the object of the Father's tenderness, who gives it its place in the world' (LS, 77).❤️