

Chapter Three
Spirituality



Spirituality



*"Now the ears of my ears awaken
the eyes of my eyes are opened."*

E.E. Cummings

"Sophia says... God created me when his purpose first unfolded, before the oldest of God's works...I was by God's side, a craftsperson, delighting God day after day, ever at play in God's presence, at play everywhere in the world, and pleased with the human race."

Proverbs 8

"Life is a rhythm of losing and finding: every little search reflects the yearning for completion, stirring the heartbeat of all creation."

Anna Burke, The Quality of Mercy

Centering Prayer as a Means to Transformation of Consciousness

Tom O'Connor, a businessman living in Ballinrobe, once said to me, "*If you want to get something done properly, get the cailíns to do it.*" His reference to *the girls* was to the Mercy Sisters of the local community, whom he saw as being dedicated women, achieving a lot with few resources. This has been our *modus operandi* as religious since our foundation in 1831, as we developed a rigorous work ethic for what was seen as a greater good. Yet, Catherine McAuley herself wrote "*...above all things, constant, fervent prayer.*" This spiritual dimension of our lives is the source from which we draw strength and inspiration.

When doing an MA in Applied Christian Spirituality, I did my thesis on Centering Prayer, a type of meditative or contemplative practice. It derives from the life of Jesus, when, in the midst of his short ministry, he spent time in the desert and often took comfort in solitary prayer. Jesus' life inspired the early Desert Elders, when they left all material possessions and faced what they termed inner demons. The wisdom they garnered was revived by a Trappist monk, Thomas Merton, who identified the influence of their prayer as being of enormous significance on the world of their day. Society went through a major shift at that time, changing from being tribal in nature to what we would now identify as being modern. This shift has been termed as a development to the first Axial Age.

This revival was further developed by another Trappist monk, Thomas Keating. He and some of his community went back to many Christian sources of contemplative prayer, notably the fourteenth century book, *The Cloud of Unknowing*. What is now known as Centering Prayer came from these sources and is practiced by many across the world. It is a simple way of prayer, whereby one spends daily time in silence, with the intention of inviting God's presence within, repeating a short, sacred word. It involves handing over the prayer time to the Divine, so as to be led by the Spirit through all the events of the day.

Looking at how our human way of living as a species affects climate change, causes war and propagates extreme inequality of resources, it is clear that our lifestyle has to change. Our standard of living damages the very fabric of life itself. If we do not choose an alternative way to live on our beautiful but fragile home planet we, and many more of our companions in the web of life, will perish. We need to come to our senses and choose to live in a radically different way, one that is being recognised as the second Axial Age.

In my thesis, I wanted to explore how Centering Prayer could be a practice that could be an enabler of this shift to the new Axial Age. When writing my thesis, I

invited some Mercy Sisters to participate in the study. Narrowing my focus, I chose to invite sisters who had entered religious life before Vatican II and who had lived in Ireland during the previous twenty years. This meant that they had lived through enormous change in religious life, as well as being the subject of much controversy following the *Ryan Report (The Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse)*. In this way, I could measure if the practice of Centering Prayer could be an influence in healing of past hurt, as well as being something that could enable a change of heart.

The chosen *cailíns*, over the weeks of Lent, dedicated themselves to the twice daily practice of Centering Prayer and, true to Tom O'Connor's words, came through with flying colours. The interviews they gave showed clearly that this contemplative prayer method can indeed change hearts and open people to a new way of living.



By its nature, my research was limited, needing to focus on a small group of people. Nevertheless, it has demonstrated the powerhouse for change that exists among our sisters. Contemplative prayer is practiced in many of our communities and is being opened to many of the wider community on a constant basis. It is part of a much larger, global movement that holds great potential for that much desired leap of faith into a completely new moment of evolution. The practice of meditation is a scientifically verified means of flexing the inner muscles that are part of moving beyond routine action into ego-diminished, radical change. The perennial demons,

natural to the human spirit, continue to manifest themselves today though we give them new names. What had been termed gluttony by the Desert Elders might be recognised in modern consumerism. The demon of lust might be recognised in different addictions today. One of the worst demons was named by the Desert Elders as *accidie*. This extreme listlessness or lack of willingness to act could be identified today in the insidious presence of depression in contemporary society. Such passivity or sense of being ineffective as an individual might be identified as a reason for not taking action in the face of injustice.

At the same time, what has been called subtle activism is making a difference. One of the participants in my study was able to cite the lowering of anti-social behaviour in an area through the establishment of adoration of the Blessed Sacrament in the local church. Some say that the first place to rectify environmental damage is through admiration of the natural world. The bottom line is that doing tasks alone cannot solve the problem – we must begin with a change of heart, moving from a place of transformed consciousness.

Suzanne Ryder

Catherine Coleman was the first person to bring Centering Prayer to Ireland. While in ministry in the USA, she got to know Basil Pennington, a member of Thomas Keating's community. He was one of the first to formulate Centering Prayer as a modern method. Catherine introduced it to the Star of the Sea Retreat Centre in Mullaghmore when she worked there. Now that she has moved to Galway, she shares it with different groups.





A meditation group meets regularly in the Árd Bhríde community in Castlebar.

Bethany Bereavement Support

“Love, speaking in silence is the way into another’s grief,” (Basil Hume OSB). This sums up Bethany Bereavement Support Group ministry. It is a parish-based group ministry which aims to help those bereaved and grieving. Support is offered on a one-to-one basis in the home, by phone, to groups in drop-in centres and help is given at liturgies, if requested. The distinctive features of Bethany are that the group does not wait to be asked, but initiates contact with the grieving family, every family is visited irrespective of religion, nationality or cause of death and the spiritual dimension of grief is recognised.

Death is a fact of life and something each of us experiences many times. In Ireland, in the past, death was a community event accompanied by specific rites and sacred rituals. The entire neighbourhood was involved in providing practical assistance and emotional support to the bereaved. The bereaved were given the time and the space to openly mourn their loved one. Sadly, for many, these wise, long-established customs have well-nigh disappeared. The growth in the number of nursing homes, hospices and funeral parlours coupled with the change in the fabric of our society have led to the demise of some wholesome traditions concerning death and dying.

Dr Elizabeth Kubler Ross's research for her book *On Death and Dying* was done, mainly, in Columbian Presbyterian Medical Center, New York. It was in that centre that Fr Myles O'Reilly SJ, began working as a chaplain in 1975. On his return to Ireland in 1982, he initiated retreats in Milltown Park, titled *Death - A Christian Response*. From these retreats, Bethany Support Groups were born. Training began and in 1986 the first Bethany groups were established.

In 2007, this ministry spread to the west. In a survey done on the needs of the parish of Athenry, support for the bereaved topped the list. A group of twelve in the parish offered to get involved. The National Executive of Bethany was approached leading to my being trained as a Co-ordinator/Trainer. Esker Retreat House near Athenry seemed the obvious venue for training, but how would people feel about a twelve-week course there and where would I find people with the expertise to deliver aspects of the course outside my areas of specialisation? I shared my concerns with Frs. Tony King PP and Johnny Doherty CSSR, and we agreed to form a west of Ireland core group of volunteers interested in promoting Bethany. Within a few weeks, we had a clinical psychologist, a palliative care nurse, a psychotherapist, a third-level chaplain with graduate qualifications in bereavement, and a pastoral care worker dealing with families affected by suicide on board. The enthusiasm and generosity of this group convinced me that the hand of God was in this venture, and all would be well.

The essential modules of the course are skills of listening and empathy, self-awareness, stages of grief, the grieving process, grief related to the death of a child and death by suicide, coping with loss and change, group facilitation, forgiveness, funeral liturgies, the structures of a parish group, finance... The final day is a mini-retreat. Through prayer, reflection, sharing, rituals, symbols and hymns, trainees face their own journey through grief. Esker Retreat House is an excellent venue to explore the spiritual aspects of grief. The chapels and the grounds offer beautiful space for prayer and reflection. To date, we have trained about 24 parish groups consisting of men and women of all ages. We also trained a group from Northern Ireland.

God has blessed every step of Bethany's journey into the west. I see this ministry of consolation as very much in keeping with our Mercy charism, and Pope Francis's challenge to be people of compassion. I am greatly heartened by the generosity, commitment and enormous goodness of both the core group and those we have trained. I see real hope for our Church because people are being given a more active role in their parishes, especially in liturgy. It is a privilege and a joy to be part of a movement which enables people to enter the sacred space of compassionate listening. This is holy ground and as Macrina Weidekeher writes :

*"Blessed are you if you can offer to others a heart that feels their sorrow;
a heart that can wait quietly beside them;
a heart that doesn't try to hurry the healing;
a heart big enough to embrace the mystery of another's grief."*

Seasons of the Heart



Mary Glennon

Christian Meditation

Rita Mc Garty is part of a group that meets for Christian Meditation in Sligo. Approximately thirty people meet on a weekly basis, following the style of meditation developed by John Main. Jesus prayed for oneness, so when they pray, they feel the connection with all on the planet. The space in which they meet is small but they believe such groups send the energy of love to the ends of the universe. There is no limit to the ripple effects!



The Ecological Dimension of St Michael's Family Life Centre, Sligo

In 1995, the diocese of Elphin offered a beautiful building with its own grounds to the people of Sligo for family services. This was an exciting and challenging moment for all those in this place at that time. From the beginning, we saw its potential - an attractive house in the womb of nature. It was an ideal setting to implement our mission statement: *"St Michael's Family Life Centre promotes the wellbeing of the family through education for relationships with God, with each other and our earth."*



Long before *Laudato Si'* the centre community was aware of the importance of cultivating and nurturing the beauty of earth. This in turn enriched visitors to the centre. As people walked up the avenue to this place of hospitality, which is the Family Life Centre, they experienced the healing effect of shrubs and flowers. The trees at the back are a reminder that all things change. The mountains that can be seen from the front invite us to seek what is permanent.

One of the first ecological projects developed by the centre was a community garden for the organic growing of vegetables. As well as learning skills of gardening and composting there is a magic in picking one's own vegetables straight from the earth. This is true especially for people who grew up in urban areas. This work was supported by a monthly newsletter on the environment. In conjunction with this project we organised organic cookery classes. Once a year, staff and volunteers brought our best vegetables to the Organic Centre in Rossinver, where we had a celebratory meal together. Long after the food was eaten the camaraderie lingered. Frequent seminars, with an ecological dimension, continue to this day.



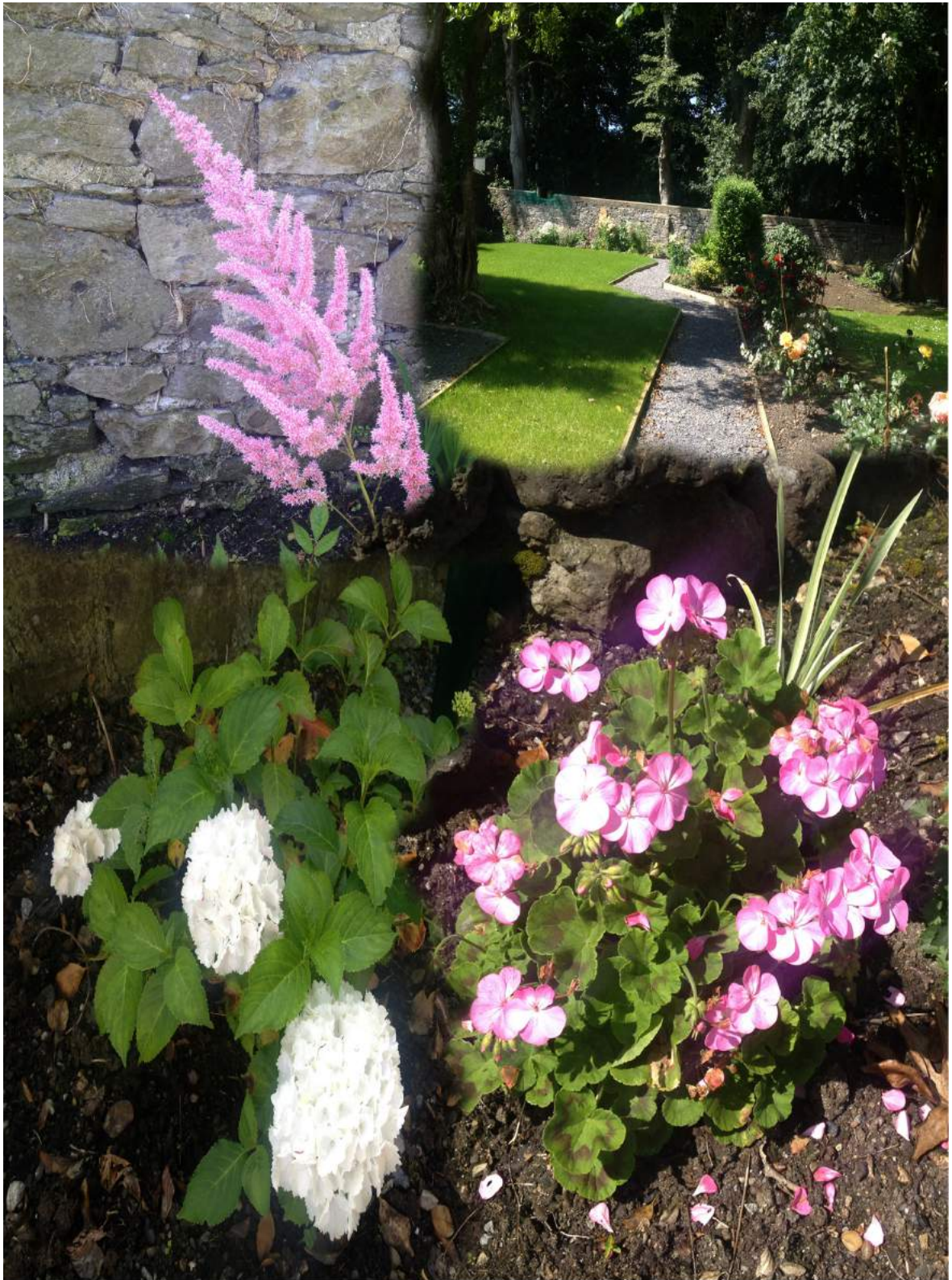
The natural world is never far from the life of the Centre. I remember dancing the Dances of Universal Peace outside on the lawn in our bare feet. Here we experienced our God, each other and our earth. For me these were moments of bliss. In moments of sorrow, nature also befriends us by providing a healing space. At one stage, the centre developed a support group for women who lost babies through miscarriage. It was known as CALM - *Care After Loss Through Miscarriage*. As part of the grieving process the group planted a rockery on Good Friday in memory of their precious



children. The gardener tends this plot with care in respect for the pain of those who created it.

When the Centre reached its twentieth anniversary what better way to mark this significant occasion than to plant a celebratory garden. A neglected piece of earth was transformed into a place of beauty. This is a gentle oasis in a sometimes fast and furious world, a space to reflect, to meditate or just sit quietly and discover who we are expected to be. Surrounded by a multitude of species we find our unique place on the planet. On a summer day one can feast on a riot of colour from a variety of roses, gelaniums, dahlias, salvias, aubretia to name but a few. This is a soulful place. Truly, *'One is nearer to God in a garden than anywhere else on earth.'*

Rita Mc Garty



Breda Fadden is one of the many sisters in the Western Province who is trained in the art of Spiritual Companionship. As well as meeting people in this role, she provides one-to-one bereavement support in Galway City. The centre is grant-funded and can therefore be offered as a free service.



Bernardine Morrisroe

Bernardine Morrisroe is a Prayer Guide at Knock Shrine. Prayer Guidance invites people to take some quiet time each day for a week. They can share how they feel themselves being led by the Spirit with a trained guide. In this way, they have the opportunity to look at their lives and to appreciate their gifts. Several of our sisters serve in this role, in Knock and elsewhere.



Goretti Bohan

Patients and their families need great care while in a hospital. As well as care of the body, they require pastoral care. **Goretti Bohan**, one of our sisters in Galway,

engages in this ministry in the Bon Secours Hospital in Galway. Others among us have engaged in this ministry of chaplaincy in different hospitals over the years.



Pilgrimage and ritual are other ways that we celebrate and share our spirituality.



Sr Berkman meditating on the Stations of the Cross.

Spiritual Renewal

I had the opportunity of spending a few great weeks being exposed to the message of the *An Tairseach Ecology Centre* in Wicklow in the Spring of 2014. It was only after I came away that I realised the great grace it was for me and how it has affected my sense of God and my spirituality. I had previously spent many years in Kenya in busy work environments, and despite participating in many 'spiritual' exercises my faith had not 'developed' much from the 70s and 80s. It was now like as if I was given permission to question, but more so it opened up a very rich understanding of the universe and God, and the spiritual treasure of looking at creation and all of life in the light of evolution. We were exposed to a certain amount of ecology, e.g. organic farming, climate change, global warming and its consequences, and the greenhouse gas effect which is mainly caused by 'first' world pollution and extravagance.

In the many years I was in Kenya it was at times very evident that climate change is taking hold. Periods known as 'the rainy seasons' were shortening and becoming more unreliable, resulting in poorer crop yields. Overgrazing of the land and felling of trees for firewood contributed to soil erosion and expansion of the semi-arid or even semi-desert and desert conditions. Add to this the increased population growth and you have a situation where many people remain in a subsistence mode of existence.

The population of Kenya has increased by a factor of more than six times since independence in 1963! Population growth has been due to exposure to modern medicine (albeit limited), better nutrition and increased longevity. Education has opened the minds of rural peoples to modern life and they want the best for themselves and their families, as we do. Modern technology is enabling them to 'skip' a few generations of struggle that was so much part of our history.

I often feel the institutional Church does not acknowledge the fact that a high percentage of our people today are highly educated. It continues to preach pious platitudes which belong to a past age and which no longer address the vital questions which science and modern thinking raise in our minds. I wonder if the 'official' church will take Francis's *Laudato Si'* seriously.

One of the greatest spiritual thinkers of the 20th century, Teilhard de Chardin, is still *persona non grata* in the Church. His writings, and the more recent writings of Ilia Delio and John Feehan, hold profound treasures of thought which delight the soul and bring together factual science and its implications for our faith and living.

Marian Dolan (recently returned Missionary)