

CONVERSATIO 2011



MONTH : JUNE
NUMBER : 6
VOLUME : XLI

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St. Scholastica's Priory
Manila

Dear Sisters,

In June we will celebrate our Independence Day on the 12th and on June 19, we will celebrate and commemorate the 150th anniversary of the birth of our National Hero, Jose Rizal. So it is a good occasion to reflect on LOVE OF COUNTRY. I purposely did not use the word "nationalism" because this can deteriorate into chauvinism or gingoism which means: my country, right or wrong. But it is not only our duty as citizens but as Christians to love our country, the land of our birth. This means first of all to have a sense of history and to appreciate our cultural legacy, the many good values of our ancestors that characterize us as a people--generosity, reverence for nature, pakikisama, bayanihan, etc. It means also appreciation for the many brave and upright people who gave our country dignity and even gave up their lives to give our country freedom from foreign invaders. One such a hero is Jose Rizal. It is fitting that we get ourselves involved in the celebration and activities that groups are preparing for his 150th birthday. I belong to a group which will have a series of activities which will culminate on June 17 in a Concert in CCP. Its highlight will be the choosing of 35 young people (men and women) who embody today the values of Rizal. They will be given an award during the concert and mentoring in the future. I urge all our schools to see to it that they get involved in these celebrations and also to prepare their own institutional tribute to our national hero.

Love of country means for us today also to be active in the efforts at social transformation in all areas of life, in the fostering of good governance, in battling all forms of corruption when these may be found in all levels of society especially in our own institutions, communities, families, etc. It also means teaching our students to transcend family individualism and develop a sense of the common good, to inculcate in them the importance of service and volunteerism in the midst of the reign of greed, individualism, cut-throat competition which are obstacles to our gelling as truly one nation and one people.

Since we know that everything is ultimately grace, our love of country should urge us to sincerely and indefatigably pray for our country and people.

Sincerely yours,



Sister Mary John Mananzan, OSB

STATIO CONFERENCE

GOODNESS

By: Sr. Baptista Busmente, OSB

Introduction:

Our statio theme this month is the 6th fruit of the Holy Spirit called **GOODNESS**. Many authors say that **Goodness** is not easy to define because it encompasses other fruits of the Holy Spirit. According to Joshua-Ashish Mcwan, “Goodness in us is not a mere passive quality, but the deliberate preference of right to wrong...resistance of all moral evil and the choosing and following of all moral good.”

We frequently use the word “good”, but what one considers “good” someone else will take only as fair. The word “good” has so many uses: good at math (competence), good child (behavior), good food (delicious), good party (enjoyable), etc. A good book for research is quite different from a good book for bed-time reading but both are good. Both have a purpose: both benefit the reader. What then is **goodness** as fruit of the Spirit?

It has been said that “goodness is easier to recognize than to define.” According to William Barclay “goodness is the quality which outdoes what a person deserves and which desires to give all the help that benefits her/him.” He continues to say that the primary idea of goodness is “generosity”. In other words, a truly good person who is led by the Spirit does not try or use someone else for personal gain or benefit but for the good and benefit of the other. It does not have any manipulative quality within. That is why this kind of person is considered trustworthy and others are drawn to her/him.

In simple words, one can say that if a person wants to be good according to the gift of the Spirit, one is ready to do acts of goodness: **it is really love, generosity, and kindness in action.**

What do we mean by saying: I had an experience of goodness? We can mean something different but there is one thing in common--there is a kind of benefit given to someone. A good deed benefits one in some way or another. It is an act of kindness. There is an overlapping of goodness with the other fruits of the Spirit such as gentleness, kindness, faithfulness and love.

At this point allow me to tell you my personal experience of goodness from a person I did not know before. In 1962 on my 3rd year as a Junior sister I was sent to Rome to join the International Juniorate Program in Grottaferrata. It was my first international flight and there was a bit of fear inside me. But the sisters consoled me saying that the next morning I would be in Rome but it took me 3 days to reach Rome. Upon arrival in Bangkok for a stopover we were told to be in a hotel because the plane could not proceed to Rome due to a big engine trouble. Other passengers were booked to other airlines, but because of my 50% fare discount from PAL no

other airline would honor my ticket. Then I met a lady of the Ortigas family in Manila (whose name I cannot remember anymore) who took me under her care. She was on her way to Madrid with her son who was to study there. The following day she took me around the city and that night they were booked to fly to their destination. She pitied me that I would be left behind and saw my predicament. I could only go with an airline in alliance with PAL. In her goodness she wanted to buy a new ticket to Rome for me so that I could go along with her. She told me that I had no obligation to pay her back. Of course with no permission from Mother Prioress I did not accept the offer. Until now I cannot forget the goodness and kindness I experienced from her.

GOD SOURCE OF ALL GOODNESS

God is the source of all that is good. “He is abounding in Goodness.” (Ex. 34:6). In the book of Genesis God called into existence each phase of creation and He saw that it was good. When He created human beings he saw that it was “very good”. (Gen.1:31). “The earth is full of the goodness of the Lord.” (Ps. 34:5). God’s deliverance of His people from Egypt and care for them are also a revelation and expressions of His goodness. In spite of their rebellious acts against God, He always relented to the pleas of his people and withdrew the punishment due to them. God’s goodness is for everyone as “He makes the sun to shine on the bad and the good people alike and gives rain to those who do good or evil.” (Matt.5:43). It is his goodness that sustains, provides for and takes care of his entire creation. “Look at the birds in the sky, they do not sow or spin...neither do they harvest nor store food in the barns, yet your heavenly Father feeds them”. (Matt. 5:26). We, too, should care for His creation. The goodness of God as taught by Jesus leads us to repentance, to forgive, to love our enemies, to pray for those who persecute us, to give a blessing to those who curse us....(Matt. 5). All these show us how to practice goodness and to be ready for sacrifice for the sake of the Gospel. When we learn to be and do good as led by the Spirit, we become mature Christians and this gift and fruit of goodness will sink “deep into the core of our being and personality”. (Michael Bradley). This is what we say in Tagalog: **Ang bunga ng kagandahang loob ay kabutihan sa gawa.**

Above all, the goodness of God is revealed to us in that “He did not keep back His Son from us; He sacrificed him for the forgiveness of our sins and to bless us with eternal life.” Because of his unconditional love for us his goodness is for everyone even though we are unworthy of it. He gifted us with more than what we deserve because his purpose for us is-- eternal life with Him.

GOOD PERSONS IN SCRIPTURE

1. The Good Samaritan: (Luke 10 ff)

In the original teaching of Jesus he showed the example of the Good Samaritan in the context of charity--love of neighbor. His love for an enemy was put into action. He did not miss the chance to show love to one who was in need. He interrupted his journey, bound the wounds of the man, took him to an inn and saw to it that he was cared for. The help given was not deserved. It went beyond what was expected of him but the wounded man got the benefit of being cured.

2. Parable of the Talents: (Good Steward)

When the master called his servant to account for the talents he received, the Master said: “Well done, good and faithful servant...” (Matt. 25:21). Good here is associated with the gift of

faithfulness. It refers to a behavior that went beyond the expectation of the master. He took good care of his capital. This servant made extra efforts and maybe took some form of risk to give the master gain and profit. The practice of goodness on the part of the servant went beyond the mere requirements of law. He went “an extra mile”.

3. Parable of the Sower: (Luke 8:15 ff)

Jesus spoke about the good soil comparing it to a good person with a good heart who hears the Word of God and responds to it. Goodness here is revealed by an honest and good person ready to receive the Word of God and then responds to it in faith. This will accomplish God’s purposes and expectation of her/him to be able to lead a good life in God.

4. The Rich Young Man (Luke 18:18-19)

In this passage of Luke the rich young man calls Jesus good teacher. “Why do you call me good? No one is good, except God alone.” We can talk about good people, good things only by human standards but only God is infinite Goodness. In John 3:11 it says “that the one who does good is of God.” True goodness can only flow from the heart of God.

5. The Good Shepherd (Jn.10)

“I am the good shepherd. A good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” (Jn.10:11). Like Jesus, the life of a good shepherd is about dying and living for the good of others; how one is concerned for those under his care. I can only think of the poor trying to earn a living at the risk of being laid off, the scavengers who risk their lives in the midst of dirt and pollution just to get some money to feed their children and to give them the basic education they need. The hardships they have to endure and challenges they have to face each day tell us the value of caring for the good of the family.

According to John Rittenbaugh (“Personal” – Aug. 1998) Goodness can also be “aggressive or sharp”. It expresses itself that way to attain a good result. It can rebuke, correct to produce a “good” in a person. Thus, Jesus rebuked the money changers and sellers in the temple to teach them the sacredness of the place. Likewise parents correct a child for the purpose of helping her/him become a mature and responsible adult later on. In community corrections are expressions of goodness because it is done for the good of the sister and for the common good.

GOODNESS IN THE RB

1. Chapter 4 : Tools of Good Works

There are 73 short injunctions of St. Benedict for the practice of good works in the monastery. They are given to us one after another otherwise we might miss to see them ourselves. In other words, they are good monastic practices as St. Benedict admonishes us to do. He tells us that as we grow and change in our monastic life we must not forget that we are God’s creatures and it is only through Him that the forces of evil can be fought by acts of goodness. All these tools of the spiritual life--peace, justice, respect, love, mercy, etc.--are the work of a

lifetime. St. Benedict encourages us that in the end when we see that we have failed, we must never lose sight of the mercy and goodness of God who will never fail us.

2. Chapter 72: The Good Zeal of Monks

St. Benedict as a realist knew that it is not always easy to do good. This chapter at the end of the Rule speaks of fervent love, humble love, pure love. The foundation of this love is the daily, ordinary practice of charity, of goodness towards one another in community. It is to see the face of Christ in all whom we meet day in and day out. Do I see Christ in my sisters? Do they see Christ in me? Chapter 72 portrays to us the life of goodness that should be found in the monastery. It is the summary of the Rule “How good and how pleasant it is for people to live in unity...” (Ps. 134)

Chapter 66 in the Rule demonstrates how guests must be welcomed as Christ himself. We have to show kindness and goodness to those who come to our door, rich and poor alike even at an inconvenient time. Abba Cassian, a desert monastic, told the following story:

Once upon a time we two monks visited an elder. Because of his hospitality we asked him: “Why do you not keep the rule of fasting when you receive visiting brothers?” And the old monastic answered, “Fasting is always at hand but you cannot have me always. Further more, fasting is certainly a useful and necessary thing, but it depends on our choice, while the law of God lays it upon us to do the works of charity (goodness). Thus, receiving Christ in you, I ought to serve you with all diligence, kindness but when I have taken leave of you, I can resume the rule of fasting again.”

What does the story tell us?

In the chapter on the sick Joan Chittister writes in her commentary to the Rule: “Care of the sick is done in the name of God ... Nothing is too much. Nothing is to be spared. Nothing that could do good is to be called forbidden.” How much of our precious time do we give or spend with our sick sisters?

OUR CONSTITUTIONS

As a novice we used to read during our spiritual study the book of Dom Marmion (now Blessed Marmion) entitled Christ, the Ideal of the Monk. There is a chapter which he called the “*Bonum Obedientiae*”. It was all about the vow of obedience. In our Constitutions in chapter II we read also “the good of obedience”, in paragraph #13. Why is it called the “good of obedience”? Reading further gives us the answer. In rendering the “Good of Obedience” to our superiors and to one another in faith and serving each other in love (which is goodness for me) we build up and support the community. Thus it unites us with the will of God.

“CONSPIRATORS” OF GOODNESS

The title of a book A Conspiracy of Goodness made me curious of its contents. The last chapter speaks about mission as a “conspiracy of goodness”. We usually understand the word

“conspiracy” with negative connotations. But the author of this book defines conspiracy as “working together in joint action.” Ronald Messer, author of this book, wrote: “When Christians respond to God’s call to join in the divine mission of liberating love, the Church engages in a conspiracy of goodness that transcends earthly political powers.”

The conspirators of goodness emerged during the Nazi period. The Christian “conspirators” committed unlawful acts according to the norms of the Nazis but not by the standards of God. Their civil disobedience was “illegal” but not wrong. They demonstrated what Teilhard de Chardin called a “conspiracy of love”. Ordinary people acted in extraordinary ways to hide Jews in their homes, monasteries, attics, etc under the threat of death. False documents and ID’s saved the lives of thousands of Jews. To mention a few: The most dramatic rescue occurred in Denmark when the King conspired against the Nazis and 8,000 Jews were saved. Bishop Kiril of Bulgaria led a campaign of civil disobedience and tried to lie down himself on the railroad tracks to stop the train from carrying Jews to death camps. In Assisi the citizens sheltered the Jews in old monasteries and convents to save them.

Even in our country during the time of Martial Law there were so called “activists” who were black-listed by the government as subversives. People especially the sisters and priests tried to hide them also in convents with the risk of being found out. Some were helped to leave the country to escape from imprisonment, torture or even death. They were also “conspirators of goodness.”

All these acts of love and goodness come from the gift and fruit of the Spirit.

CHALLENGES OF GOODNESS

From experience we know that it is easy to talk about love, about goodness but it is another thing to put it into practice. Also from experience we know that one does not learn anything from day dreaming. We learn to be good by doing acts of goodness. We learn to be humble by practicing humility. Through conscious effort we acquire values and virtues by doing them. It is in community that we learn to see our “dark spots”--and that we learn to forgive, to reconcile, to care for one another and to be mindful of each other.

We know that as we are created in the image and likeness of God, we all possess goodness in our hearts. It is inherent in our human nature. Because of our free will, life is made up of choices. One can choose the good and the other, evil. Even non-believers are doing wonderful charitable things for others and for them it is just the natural thing to do. For us Christians and followers of Christ whatever good we do for others comes as fruit of the Spirit

In community we have many chances and opportunities to practice love, kindness as acts of goodness. We cannot expect a community to be perfect or ideal but community helps us to grow as monastics in the practice of virtues as gifts of the Spirit.

We can support one another, empower one another and learn from one another. It will cost time and effort to be of service to the community or to help one in need. Oftentimes it demands presence in the community: for prayer, meals, recreation and meetings. This is where priorities are important. Doing our duties responsibly and well are good. But in the real practice of the “art

of goodness” it is doing beyond what is required of us for the good of the community or good of someone. In this sense I think volunteering, offering one’s time and talent for the common good or for someone is goodness at its best--goodness translated into action.

I like to quote Robert Ellsberg who wrote: “Whatever we give and not counting the cost nor calculating a return, we are learning to bear the beams of love and goodness.”

CONCLUSION

Each one of us has experienced goodness in our lives from our family, teachers, formators, superiors, co-sisters but what we experience daily is the goodness of God through our Benedictine way of life. We can always say with the psalmist: “How shall I repay the Lord for all his goodness to me?” (Ps.116)

May this fruit of the Spirit urge us to confide in God’s goodness just as the psalmist experienced it and said: “Taste and see that the Lord is good...” (Ps. 34)

As we continue our spiritual journey may we call on the Good Shepherd to lead and guide us and cry out: “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.” (Ps. 23)

And as we end this reflections let us sing in our heart: “Forever I will sing the goodness of the Lord.” (Ps. 89)

“THAT IN ALL THINGS GOD MAY BE GLORIFIED”

1. **Personal reflection:** Recall an experience in your life when you experienced goodness from someone you did not expect.
2. **Communal sharing:**
 - a. What practices of **goodness** can we encourage in community as a resolution?
 - b. What do we mean when we say: “**She is a good Sister**”?
 - c. How will you qualify **goodness**?

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Homily on the Easter Vigil (April 23, 2011 8:00 PM)
St. Scholastica Sisters, Baguio City
Fr. Philip Francis Bersabe

Instead of Happy Easter, let me greet you all: “Be Easter!” Rise again, People of God! Rise with Christ! For Christ is truly alive! He is truly Risen!

Easter is not a noun... it is a verb (*pace* Noah Webster). Easter is the celebration of the final act, the climax of the Pascal Mystery of our redemption. Last Palm Sunday, we joined Christ into His entrance to Jerusalem. From Holy Maundy to Holy Wednesday, we suffered with Him, the agony and pain of betrayal. On Holy Thursday, we dined with Him at the Last Supper as he instituted the Eucharist and the priesthood. On Good Friday, we were crucified and died with Christ. Buried with Him last Holy Saturday and now as we make this vigil, as we sing the *Exultet*, *Gloria* and *Alleluia* with the whole creation – this very night, the night of all the nights – we rise again with Him!

The celebration of Easter challenges us to ask the question that really matters to every believer – *how do we share in the Resurrection of Christ? How is Easter?* If Easter is simply a noun, then we cannot avoid asking the question – what is resurrection? No human mind, no human intelligence can unlock the mystery of Christ’s Resurrection. The best of minds turns ignorant before this profound mystery. Even St. Paul contents himself with metaphors and analogies which fall short of describing the reality. He remarks: “what eye has not seen, and ear has not heard, and what has not entered the human heart, what God has prepared for those who love him.” (1 Cor 2:9). He could only express poetically with prophet Hosea: “Death is swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where O death, is your sting?... but thanks be to God who gives us victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” (1 Cor 15:54-55, 57; Cf. Hosea 13:14). For St. Paul, to ask how are the dead to be raised up? What kind of body will they have? Is a nonsensical, foolish question (1 Cor 15:35). *Isang kabaliwan usisain kung ano ang natura ng pagkabuhay na mag-uli, ang tanging pinanghahawakan lamang ni San Pablo alinsunod sa kanyang pananampalataya ay ito ay karanasan ni Kristo at ng bawat Kristiyano.* The reading before the Gospel, taken from the Epistle to the Romans (6: 3-4) reminds us: “Are you not aware that we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried with him through baptism into his death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live in newness of life.” Resurrection is an experience of a new life, of a new creation (the first reading), with a firm faith like that of Abraham (second reading), an experience of a new Exodus (third reading), an experience of justice and compassion (fourth reading), an experience of abundance of food and of flowing water, grain, wine and milk (fifth reading).

Easter is a verb, and not a noun. It is celebration of an act, more than a state; a movement, more than a destination; a process more than a result. The liturgy we celebrate today – full of beautiful symbolisms, is itself an act. In fact, *leitourgia* literally means – the work and the act of people (*leitōs* = people + *ergon* = work/act). First, we had the Liturgy of the Light where we received and proclaim *Christus Lumen* – we journeyed with Christ from darkness to light as symbolized by the new fire and procession of Paschal Candle. Second, we had the Liturgy of the Word; we listened to *Christ, the Eternal Word* in human words (in the words of the patriarchs,

prophets, psalmists, sages, apostles and evangelists). The readings were not meant to make us drowsy or fall asleep but to show the unity of the Old Testament and the New Testament, with Christ as its definitive fulfillment. After the homily comes the Liturgy of Baptism where Christ will sanctify the water and with the renewal of our baptismal promises, we will recall our baptism when we immersed ourselves with Christ in the water of salvation and renounced the kingdom and works of Satan. And finally, the Liturgy of the Eucharist where we will meet *Christ, the Bread of Life* and partake of His Body and Blood as one community. We become one bread, one Body, one People redeemed by the blood of Christ. *Isn't it wonderful that our Liturgy itself is a movement, an act, a celebration?*

If Easter is an act, an imperative, a call to action, *why is it seemingly difficult for us to proclaim that Christ is alive! Christ is risen today!?* Perhaps due to the fact that we see more signs of death than signs of Resurrection around us. We see crippling signs of hopelessness and despair – the triple whammy in Japan – the earthquakes, tsunamis and nuclear meltdown, the on-going threat of radioactive fall-out, the unrests in Libya, Yemen, Syria, Ivory Coast and Middle East, the on-going repression in China, the spreading super-superbugs (antibiotic-resistant bacteria) in US and neighboring countries, the global destruction of the environment. No wonder the recent issue of Newsweek (March 28 & April 4 Issue) bears the title: “Apocalypse Now: Tsunamis, Earthquakes, Nuclear Meltdowns, Revolutions. What... is the Next?” we don't even have to go that far. From the deadly roads and highways to the lucrative, impeachable offices of our leaders, we really find it difficult, almost impossible to proclaim that Christ is Risen!

How do we escape this dilemma? Instead of denying the fact of Resurrection, we are forced to relegate it to the future, as something not yet happening, as something beyond our experience, as something belonging to *novissimis* or last things. Hence, Easter becomes irrelevant to our present-day concerns, unlike Christmas which has seemingly more business and commercial impact. Resurrection becomes a dry proposition to be memorized and recited during the Profession of Faith: “On the third day, He rose again... (something of the past)... I believe in the resurrection of the body and life everlasting. (as something of the future). Resurrection ceases to be a present reality. It ceases to be a gift, an act, an event, a task and a challenge. To make Resurrection as something belonging only to the future or to the past is a form of escapism, making believers forgetful and complacent of their present-day duties and responsibilities. *Doesn't Jesus tell us in the Gospel of John that He has come that we may have life and have it to the full (John 10:10) and eternal life consists in knowing the only true God, and the one whom He sent, Jesus Christ (John 17:3)?*

In my on-going reflection on the Resurrection of Christ and the significance of Easter in my life as a priest, I am edified by the disciplined conduct and the calm disposition of our Japanese brothers and sisters. Their heroic disposition, honestly speaking, reduces my faith to shame. Majority of them are non-Christians. They have not even heard of Christ nor received His teachings. They neither believed nor knew anything about Resurrection but they knew one thing -- *resilience*. I am certain that few months or years from now, Japan will rise again from rumbles; sooner we will behold a resurrected Japan. I ask myself then, *what about us Filipinos? Are we forever condemned to suffer? Don't we have treasure in our midst? Didn't we receive the gift of Christian Faith?* Majority of us are believers. We are baptized and believed in the Resurrection. If there is a limit to human endurance, to human resilience no matter how strong it may have been exhibited by the Japanese, there is no limit, on the other hand, to the power of the

Resurrection for it is an act of divine omnipotence. Human resilience is nothing compared to Divine resilience. If the earthquake in Japan was life-threatening and devastating to the Japanese people – the earthquake in the Gospel of Matthew, announcing the Resurrection, is life-giving and empowering, giving new life and hope first to the women-disciples up to the present and even future believers.

But why do Filipinos languish persistently in poverty and misery? Why do we see more signs of death than signs of new life in our country? Could it be that we are simply wired up being Passion Sunday or Good Friday Christians? Are we merely contented of being a suffering people, a people of Golgotha, a people of the Cross than being Easter people? I don't think so. I don't believe that you and I are contented with our present situation. Our Easter celebration challenges us to be people of the Resurrection. It challenges us to act, to embrace responsibility for ourselves, for our fellow human beings, for our country and for the Church. Ang pagkabuhay na mag-uli ay pagkabuhay na may tunay na kalayaan, kaganapan at kapangyarihan. Tanging si Hesu- Kristo lamang ang makapagbibigay ng tunay na lakas, kalayaan at kaganapan sa buhay ng isang tao. Resurrection, far from emptying it with theological content, acquires a secular name. Resurrection means freedom. It means empowerment. It means life to the fullest.

Easter is not to end in words but in deed. Easter is not a noun, it is an action word. It does not only belong to the past or to the future but also to the present. It is not just a private affair but a collective experience. As members of the Mystical Body of Christ and as Filipino people, we are called to experience the Resurrection of Christ today. *Kung buhay ang ating Panginoon, bakit kayo inaanok mga kapatid?* Arise, let us wake up from the slavery of sin to the newness of life. Christus vincit! Christus resurrexit! Alleluia! Alleluia!

John Feehan

***The Garden God Walked in: Meditations on the Spirit
of Trees
THE DEEPER NATURE OF TREES***

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There is a widespread story in the folk literature of Europe which surfaces in Ireland – and indeed beyond – in the wonderful tale about Labhraidh Loingseach, a mythical king of the Province of Leinster. King Labhraidh Loingseach had the ears of a horse, an attribute which not surprisingly caused him considerable personal embarrassment; and since he wasn't prepared to add ridicule to his embarrassment by allowing his ears to be seen, he wore his hair very long, and the barber visited the palace only once a year. Moreover, it was a different barber every time, because the unfortunate man to whom the honour fell was immediately executed before he could breath a word to anyone about his monarch's deformity. But on one particular occasion the distraught widowed mother of the unfortunate young barber managed to persuade the king to spare her son, on condition that he swear never to reveal to another soul what he had seen under the royal tresses.

You might think his narrow escape from the headman's axe would ensure that the king's secret was deeply buried in the barber's subconscious: but not deeply enough, because so heavily did the burden of the secret weigh on his mind that he pined away for three years. In desperation he went to a Druid [a Celtic pagan priest], who advised him to go to a crossroads, take the right turn, and then tell his secret to the first tree he met. This he did – the tree happened to be a willow – and he soon recovered.

In the course of time, Craiftine, the king's bard [musician], selected this same tree for the making of a new harp. But when he ran his fingers over the strings of the new harp in the presence of his king and the court, the sounds that came from it and reached the ears of a stunned audience shaped themselves into the words “*Dá chluais chapaill ar Labhradh Loinghsech*” – “*Dá chluais chapaill ar Labhradh Loinghsech*” – the king has horse's ears. The shock brought the shamed king to his senses, and the story has a happy ending because Labraidh faced up to his disability and had regular normal haircuts ever after, where you or I might have gone after the barber or the Druid.

Now the mythological Labhraid is vaguely based on a real Chieftain of around the 2nd century B.C., but what are we to make of this society whose tales are woven together by deeds of magic, where trees are not only a vital resource at the heart of the economy, providing everything from the timber of the palace to the harp of the king's musician; but also in need of whispered human words or even heard to sing? A tradition, the unclaimed inheritance of all of us, where there is more to trees than the price of the timber they produce, and there is more to the forest than its ecology. How much more do trees mean to us than that? Or why should they mean more? That's what we want to explore here, looking backward in order to look forward later.

What trees are about

Think for a moment about the *kind* of living things trees are. They are much more than tall, woody plants. Trees are, essentially, a way of life. “Treeness” is a *special way of life that certain plants adopt*. In our time in the Earth's history these special plants are flowering plants of many different families, often quite unrelated, but the kinds of plants that have followed this way of life during earlier phases of Earth history, before plants with flowers had evolved, very different from ours. Then, the trees were like ferns and Seed ferns, Horsetails, Cycads, Gingkos and lots of others that would look strange to our eyes. On this level trees are the whales of the land: what they all have in common is that they are the dominant life forms on land, and they are the longest-lived large creatures on Earth. Eighty-five percent of Earth's biomass is plants, and 90% of the plant biomass is trees. Their height, rigidity, longevity give them a permanence from our human perspective. These are not accidental characteristics; they are what being a tree is all about. These are the attributes that lift them as far as possible into the air, so that they can spread leaf surfaces to intercept the maximum amount of sunlight. Charles Darwin in his Diaries likened trees to giant eyes, which is very perceptive, for they are vast batteries of light receptive cells. They are the main go- betweens in the transformation of radiated energy into all the necessities of all multi- cellular life, plant and animal.

These characteristics are responsible in large measure for the *utilitarian* value trees have for us: providing raw materials in the form of timber and fuel, fruit and other things we can use; as well as the indispensable role forests play in the maintenance and regulation of vital

environmental functions such as watershed protection, soil conservation, the maintenance of atmospheric quality and so on.

Trees and the forests in which they live are the richest home of biodiversity on land. Because they take centuries, tens of centuries, to attain their full development and richness, they have time to gather to themselves the immense diversity of living things that define them. We read that, for example, there are something in the order of 60,000 species of insects and spiders in 2 ha of Ecuadorian rain forest, whereas there are only 20,000 in the whole of Britain and Ireland – and there might be as many again 100 km away! The ecologist Edward Wilson described a single tree in the Tambopata Reserve in Peru which had 43 species of ants belonging to 26 genera: This is equal to the entire ant fauna of the British Isles. Peter Ashton found 700 species of trees in 10 selected 1 hectare plots in Borneo – equal in number to the whole tree fauna of North America. And the same holds for birds, butterflies, beetles and other insects.

But there is a real danger that in discussing biodiversity we lose sight of the *moral immensity* of its diminution at our hands. Species are not reducible to numbers. The variety of life is not of a great stamp collection, with stamps of every nation, every shape and colour. Each species in this catalogue of life is the unique living embodiment of an evolutionary journey as long as our own, a journey that has a common starting point with ours, and like ours is an ongoing journey. ¹ Its extinction is *the loss of a unique mode of life's possibility*, each in its way an achievement as great as ours, a 'unique contribution to the commonwealth'. No species on earth has undergone, through all of our universe's time, its marvellous becoming just to be snuffed out of existence at our whim or our pursuit of shallow, trivial ends. Its time will come in the course of life and the Earth's revolutions, but that is not ours to call or foreshorten. If you speak the language of belief in God, and embrace what the revelation of science tells you, then no species is insignificant. Each is worthy in the eyes of God, deserving of our respect and study and admiration. Even, and perhaps especially, the most obscure. 'For heaven God has created the angels', wrote Saint Augustine, 'and for the earth creatures that crawl, and neither is superior to the other: because the hand of man can no more create a worm than an angel'.²

We may like to think of ourselves as being a little less than the angels, but we have been swept along by precisely the same exhilarating evolutionary maelstrom as all the other species which people this moment of life's time with us, 4,000 million years of life having been spent travelling with them, and before that we have shared the same remote origins in the dust of exploding stars.

The area of rain forest destruction is nearly 150,000 square kilometers a year. This is as large as the area of West Virginia or Costa Rica. A straight-line extrapolation of this rate means it will all be gone by 2135 A.D. It is much higher in some areas. Madagascar (one of the great hotspot of biological diversity) has lost 93% of its forest cover. The Atlantic forest coast of Brazil is 99% gone. The forests of most of the islands of Polynesia and the Carribean are gone altogether.

The measure of their loss – about which Sean McDonagh will say more – is incalculable: in terms of the materials they provide us with: timber and food and medicine, their contribution to the functioning and integrity of ecological processes or climatic balances, perhaps in terms of

their possible genetic contribution to our future well-being: but incalculable also on a deeper level to which I will return shortly.

What can be the meaning, the purpose, of such unnecessary, extravagant efflorescence of life? If you are not of a religious persuasion this is not really a meaningful question. It is just the way things have turned out, a result of the way evolution works: and all we have to do is to learn about them and enjoy them, make use of them whenever they are useful to us, and take care of them because if we don't there will be consequences in terms of our human welfare.

The last twenty years have witnessed a growing awareness of all of this: reflected in the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity and the National Biodiversity Action Plans that follow from that. But the real test of concern is the application of those plans at local level, at the level of village or community, where human living confronts, encounters the multitude of other lives that are the forest. Do we value the forest deeply enough to take what actions we must if we are to live in harmony with it, with all its other lives? And is its material value – its economic, consumptive, regulatory value – enough to make us *want* to do this? And are we taking due account of all the values it embodies in making our calculation of its true worth?

The reverence that is in our spirit as we stand before the forest has also another spring that feeds it. Trees are at the root of our psyche. We – we as a species – were born in and of the forest, and grew up with it, and – as literally as makes no difference – carry its echo in our genes.

The forest in our genes

Our remote ancestors were creatures of the forest. Our spirit is tuned to its sounds, its sights, its scents. It weaves itself around our very genetic make-up. When the first humanoid primates left the forest to exploit the new evolutionary opportunities presented by events in the Tertiary epoch in earth history and became creatures of the savannah, this new open landscape of natural grassland rimmed with trees, they carried the forest with them.

Every bit as true is the fact that we are *physically* shaped in and by and for that kind of landscape of trees and forest, over a long, long time – over the greater part of our history as a species. So, too, we are all made *psychologically* and indeed spiritually, in and by and for that kind of landscape.

Indeed, I think the awe invoked within us inside our temples, palaces, cathedrals and mosques of stone – from Stonehenge to Chartres – has its genetic origins in the same deep vein of our being. The landscapes of art all feed unconsciously on this same deep stratum. They evoke their response in us because of this sense of *coming home*. The landscapes of the great human cultures all recreate it. And so too, I suggest, does the landscape of religion. In this true Eden in which our human species took shape over millions of years, trees were an integral part of the natural landscape and our developing human relationship with it. As were flowers and grass, sky and water, open space and the sounds of nature. It is then, quite literally and scientifically, true to say that we were *made* to live in a landscape of open space with abundant trees; we are genetically programmed for that. We cannot do without it any more than we can with air that has lost half of its oxygen and hope to be whole human beings.

It is little more than a few tens of thousands of years ago that our ancestors moved out of the African cradle of mankind. But we also took Africa with us, because wherever possible we have shaped the natural landscapes we made our own to resemble those in which our minds like our bodies are most at home. For a long time fire, the axe and the goat were the tools with which we shape Nature to our way, then the plough. But all through our long prehistory and history, Nature was always on our doorstep. True, it is no longer the untamed wilderness, but the experience of trees and flowers, birds and wind and stars, rocks and the sight and sound of rivers and the sea – which satisfy our deep psychological need. Places where Nature still breathes awake in us memories of a deeper childhood. The flowers and trees in every hedgerow awake them, the singing of the birds in every strip of woodland, every rocky outcrop shaped by time and the elements, every stream that follows the form of the land. We are more at home among trees. And why wouldn't we be? Were they not the furniture in the nursery of our human species, in which we learned to play?

So we *need* the wild, especially a wild world where fringes of trees frame open spaces with scattered trees, with woods behind, on the edge of the kind of open landscape best perceived and controlled with our special human eyes. We respond to trees then, not so much because it is in our *blood* to respond in this way, but because it is, truly, *in our genes*. We are most at home in their presence because this is where we were born, because this is what we were made for.

This is one level at which trees reside in our spirit. But trees are not woods or forests: a fact which gives another meaning to the expression “you can't see the wood for the trees”. That tree-fringed landscape for which we were designed is still man-made, or made by fire and tools; it is our own space, dominated by the openness our eyes were made for, space to hunt and cultivate, even though framed by trees. But the closed forest is a different thing. Here the space, if you like, is God's, it belongs to the spirits beyond Nature, behind the trees: and the experience of the mysteriousness and diversity of Creation is deeper and more acute.

I wonder has it ever struck you that it is also largely by burning the forests of another age that we are wreaking environmental havoc that we bring about the hemorrhaging of the diversity of life on earth. It is by burning the great forests that covered the Earth in earlier geological epochs, by squandering the energy legacy banked in the compressed remains of swamp forests on land in the case of the coal we burn, forests of the ocean in the case of the oil our machines guzzle.

To be continued...