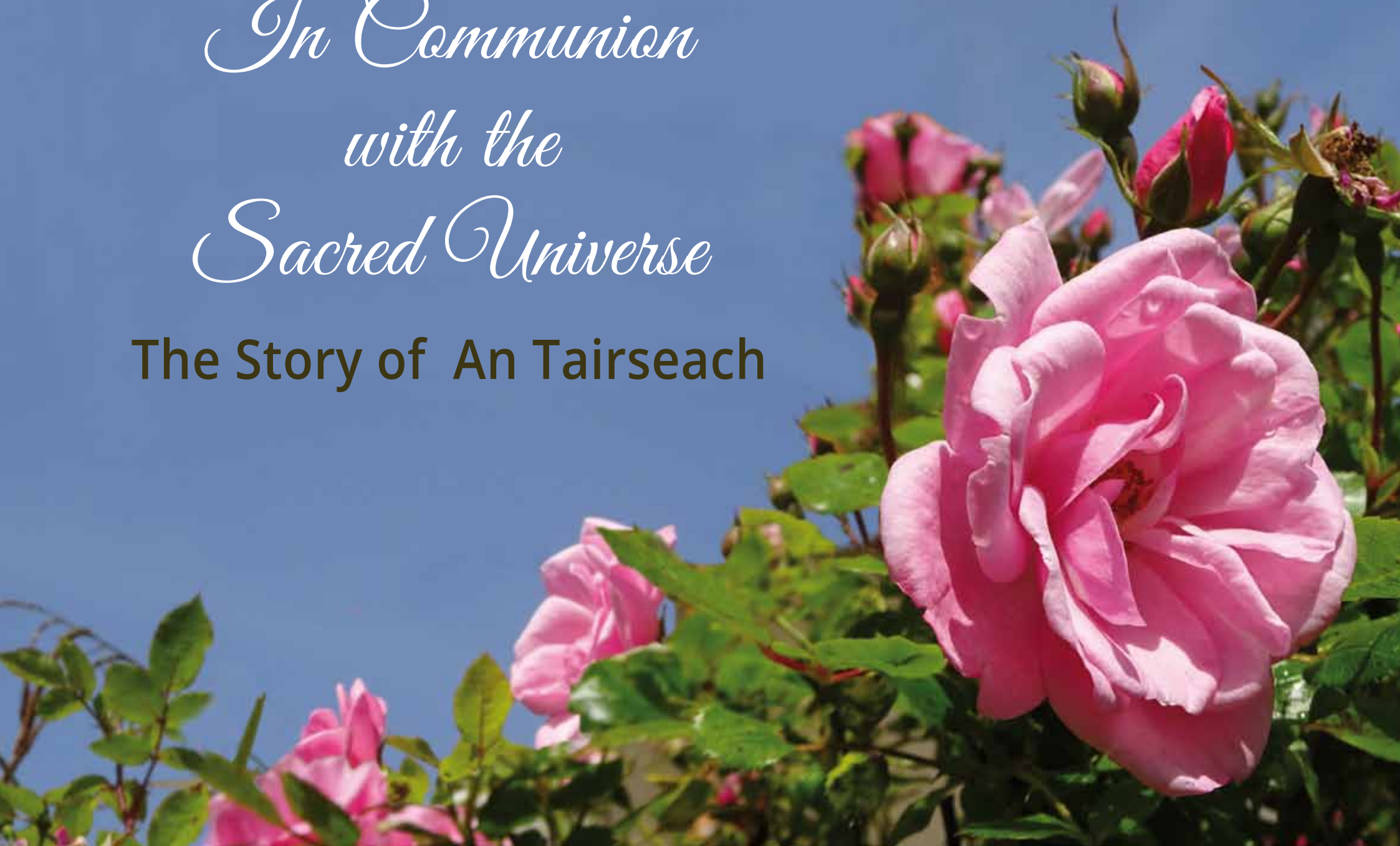


*In Communion  
with the  
Sacred Universe*

**The Story of An Tairseach**





*In Communion with  
the Sacred Universe*

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Marian O'Sullivan op

# **In Communion with the Sacred Universe**

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*"The universe is composed of subjects to be communed with, not objects to be exploited. Everything has its own voice. Thunder and lightning and stars and planets, flowers, birds, animals, trees, ~ all these have voices, and they constitute a community of existence that is profoundly related." - Thomas Berry*



View of Wicklow Bay and An Tairseach from the farmland



# Foreword

Our time is characterised by an ever-growing understanding of the complexity and majesty of the world around us and of the wider cosmos in which it is set: and of what Faith in our day means and requires of us as we ponder the great Mystery of Creation.

At the same time we find ourselves in a world subjected to abuse unprecedented not only in human history, but in the planet's own history. Pope Francis pulled no punches when he spoke at the Second World Meeting of Popular Movements in July 2015: '[Mother Earth] ... Our common home is being pillaged, land laid waste and harmed with impunity ... Cowardice in defending it is a grave sin ... We cannot allow certain interests – interests which are global but not universal – to take over, to dominate states and international organisations and to continue destroying creation.'

One of the most awe-inspiring phenomena in the natural world is the transformation – metamorphosis – that takes place in the life of many groups of insects; think of a butterfly or moth, or a dragonfly, which spends the early months or years of its life as a caterpillar or nymph and then, when the time comes when it must take on a new role in life and make its way in a different world, it is transformed into what casual observation might suggest must be a creature altogether different in kind, a different order of being. And yet it is the same, transformed. What directs this transformation, what makes it possible, is the presence, deeply buried in the body of the caterpillar, of clusters

of special cells that will direct the re-organisation of its resources to meet a new need and purpose when the time comes for the next step to be taken.

We see something similar across the course of human history, where the new ideas and understandings that will be needed to take humanity forward on the next stage of its journey are nurtured in small nuclei of influence where they may for long remain invisible to the world at large, until circumstances call them forth to direct the course of future events. Outstanding among the many examples is the paradigm shift in human understanding that occurred through the life of Jesus of Nazareth on the fringes of the Roman Empire two thousand years ago. Christianity in our time is again undergoing a transformative paradigm shift, a process of metamorphosis that is fuelled by the phenomenal advance of human understanding of the nature of reality: of how God is at work in the world.

Twice in *Laudato si'* Pope Francis refers to the created world as the 'other' book of revelation: the 'magnificent book in which God speaks to us and grants us a glimpse of his infinite beauty and goodness;' 'God has written a precious book, "whose letters are the multitude of created things present in the universe"' (*Laudato si'*: 12, 85). In these days of challenge the need for dedicated centres where the language of this Other Book of Creation is taught and reflected on, and the new way of living we are called to follow exemplified, becomes ever greater. Like the monasteries of an earlier Age of



Faith, they are places where people can devote time to kindling the flame of awareness in their own lives to a new intensity before going out again to share its light and heat with others.

All across the world there are these special places, where the experience and reflection that explore and keep Christian Faith in the future alive and eager are practised, ready to flare forth when the times are right; when, as Christian scripture puts it, the long-delayed bridegroom arrives (Matthew 25:6) These places are needed to give direction and hope to a world in crisis. Such a place is An Tairseach, its name reflecting that twofold movement, inward over a new threshold to spend time in exploration, practice and reflection on a different way of Human Being in the World, and out over it again to bring that richer understanding to the world of our everyday life.

Several times in the course of *Laudato si'* Pope Francis calls for 'profound interior conversion,' an *ecological conversion*, whereby the effects of our encounter with Jesus Christ become evident in our relationship with the world around us. 'Living our vocation to be protectors of God's handiwork is essential to a life of virtue; it is not an optional or a secondary aspect of our Christian experience' (*Laudato si'*, 217). The four essential aspects through which this conversion works its way into our lives are grounded in the work of An Tairseach. There is the experience through which Encounter takes place; augmented by intellectual reflection and emotional expression to deepen that encounter; the development of ritual forms appropriate to our times; and the translation of all this into ethical response and the transformative action it requires of us.

'It is here, where we stand,' Martin Buber once wrote, 'that we should try to make shine the light of the hidden divine life. There is a special something that can be found in one place. The place where this treasure can be found is the place on which one stands.' In the Book of Genesis (28:10-17) Jacob found himself at nightfall in a strange place on his way from Beersheba to Haran. He awoke to a realization that the place on which he had slept was a place where angels might, if one were awake enough to know where to look for angels, be seen ascending and descending a ladder to heaven. It may be that An Tairseach, for those who can see, is another such place.

#### **Dr. John Feehan**

*Doctor John Feehan M.I.L.I. is an Irish geologist, botanist, author and broadcaster. His work is driven by a deep commitment to the maintenance of rural biodiversity and cultural heritage, and the sustaining of rural community.*



John Feehan teaching in the organic garden.





# Introduction

It is my privilege to introduce this inspiring story of a visionary enterprise by the Dominican Sisters. It is a fitting tribute to the sisters and to all involved, written with great care and thought by Marian O'Sullivan, OP.

In 1992 at a General Chapter (a meeting of the Dominican Congregation with representatives from Ireland, South Africa, New Orleans, Portugal and Latin America) the crisis of our Planet Earth was studied and we recognised:

"The Universe is the primary revelation of the Divine. A growing understanding of the new cosmology enables us to perceive the earth as a web of life and continues to shape and transform our theology of creation. As human beings we are the reflective consciousness of the earth. As Dominican women, preachers of the truth, we recognise the ever-increasing crisis in the planet earth whereby all life, including human life, is being rapidly destroyed. As vowed women we are in a special position to support and advance the call to protect the Earth by being counter-witnesses to greed, domination and destruction.

We call one another to the urgent task of helping to save the life of the planet."

Chapter Acts: 13. 1992

It was from this challenge that the decision not to sell our land in Wicklow was made and the study and research began to create a place where a new

understanding of the Earth could be explored. Like many projects a committee was set up and we are indebted to those on the committee who persevered and supported the endeavour despite difficulties and objections. I would like to name Eamon O'Flaherty, Mary Finlay, Dominican sisters, Julie Newman, Caitriona Geraghty, Vivienne O Beirne, Margaret Fitzgerald, Helen Mary Harmey as chair, Mercy sister Anne Doyle, and Leo Cullen who gave time, expertise and support. This led us to find ways to use our land in a sustainable way and to create an organic farm. Marian outlines the development of thought, reflection and exploration that went into the planning and which eventually provided a project with three objectives:- an organic farm and shop; conservation area and an education centre.

In 2020 The Dominican sisters will celebrate 150 years' presence in Wicklow where they have provided Primary and Secondary education and where now An Tairseach meets the need to protect our fragile planet, demonstrates gentler methods of farming, creates meaningful rituals and encourages humans to address destructive practices before it is too late. This story is timely told and one that needs immediate attention and action by all.

As we are one planet and one community of life this project and its development owes its accomplishments to many people and groups of people. Our gratitude to the first Dominican community: sisters Julie Newman, Marian O' Sullivan and Caitriona Geraghty and later

joined by Pauline McGrath and Vivienne O' Beirne, for their ability and dedication to make possible all the aspirations and dreams. We are grateful to the many staff members, Board members, friends, advisers and for funding by the Dominican sisters and Pobal. Our gratitude to all the participants from all over the world who enriched the experience of the sabbatical course and who helped to spread the knowledge and urgency in their respective countries.

We are deeply indebted to Marian for her research and for telling the story of this innovative endeavour from the beginning.

**Helen Mary Harmey, op**

Chairperson, Board of Directors



An Tairseach Community 2020.

*Front:* Julie Newman, Marian O'Sullivan, Helen Mary Harmey.  
*Back:* Margaret Purcell, Pauline McGrath, Jeanette Kiely, Colette Kane.

# An Tairseach

## A Dominican Response to the Environmental Challenge

When An Tairseach was established in the mid 1990's it embraced the Universe Story<sup>1</sup> as its founding vision and continues to find this story nourishing, challenging and profoundly hopeful.

The Dominican sisters, who owned a farm and property in Wicklow Town, had used these facilities since 1870 to provide primary and secondary education in the Catholic and Dominican traditions. However each new age comes with new challenges and opportunities. The challenge of the 1990's was soul size; how do we as *homo sapiens* inhabit the earth, our beautiful planet home, in such a way that we contribute to its wellbeing and are a benign influence on all its life forms? Evidence to the contrary was mounting. Science was telling us that we were in the midst of a major extinction of species, comparable to the one that happened sixty-five million years ago when an asteroid hit the earth wiping out the dinosaurs and causing devastation lasting millions of years. The sixth extinction that we are now experiencing is however being caused by human activity. We, as educators, surely have a part to play in confronting this destruction.

We all live out of stories. What story do I tell myself, do we tell ourselves, about who we are in the world? As Irish people we have our Celtic tradition which, in the distant past, told us about the world being the body of God. The divine was worshipped by means of fire especially at the time of the changing of the

seasons and other key moments and the divine could also be contacted and protection sought at wells and groves and other holy places.

With the Christianisation of our country the Genesis Story became the relevant one. God made the world and He made it good but we, humans, messed it up. Jesus came and by his life and preaching showed us the way to live in what he called the Kingdom of God, a community of love, justice, truth and peace. With extraordinary insights he pointed out that we are all ONE, one with one another and with all creation and one with God. History has shown us how human beings in every age have given their lives to this ideal and today his followers count more than one billion people. There are however other influences that bear in on people. There is the seduction of the good life, of looking after oneself, of amassing wealth at whatever cost so that the vision of Jesus is still far from being realised even among Christians.

We human beings have developed our amazing capacities in every domain of life including an understanding of how the world works. We have discovered that our planet is a small part of a wonderful universe which began long long ago with what has come to be known as the Big Bang. How that came about is still being explored by scientists and there will surely be further insights in the years ahead. However, as of now, we know



Board members February 2018. *Back:* Fiona Walshe, Tom Curtis, Janice Codd, Kate Duggan, Gus Cullen. *Front:* Caitriona Geraghty OP, Colette Kane OP, Helen Mary Harmey OP, Julie Newman OP.



Wildflower garden.

1. Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry, *The Universe Story: From the Primordial Flaring Forth to the Ecozoic Era, A Celebration of the Unfolding of the Cosmos*. New York: Harper Collins, 1994.



*"The natural world is the primary revelation of the divine."* - Thomas Aquinas

that our universe began 13.7 billion years ago and that everything that now exists had its origin at that watershed moment.

Thousands of scientists have been and are still involved in piecing together the story of the development of our universe so that we, particularly we humans, may know the story of our origins, our total interconnectedness, our relationship to one another and to all other beings as well as to the originator of it all, that some of us call God. This is what has come to be known as the Universe Story or the New Story. It is called new because until recently it was not known to humans. Our grandparents were aware that there was a galaxy called the Milky Way of which our Earth was a part. They did not know that there are billions of stars in the Milky Way galaxy and that there are billions of galaxies.

The Hubble Telescope built in the 1920's now sends us amazing pictures of what is happening in the universe. The more we know the more we are astounded. This is a story that belongs to all of Earth's beings but is capable of being most fully understood by us, humans, through our capacity for self-reflective consciousness. It is a story that does not contradict our Christian story. Indeed it highlights how Jesus, without the benefit of today's science, knew intuitively that we are all One, one with one another and with our God and that is the most important of all knowings. Surely every child and every adult should be told this story and helped to live out of it. This is the *raison d'être* of An Tairseach.



The Cosmic Walk tells the story of the development of the universe from 13.7 billion years ago to today.



Visitors in a propagation polytunnel.



# Implementing the Vision

Moving from vision to implementation was a major step but one not beyond the capacity of the Dominican sisters who had faced many challenges since their foundation in 17th century Galway during the terrible times of the Cromwellian persecution.

Over the years they spread their wings to New Orleans in 1860 during the American Civil War and a cholera epidemic. Also in the 1860's they made foundations in Australia, New Zealand and South Africa at a time when sea journeys were long and hazardous, conditions in their place of mission were primitive and there was no return home for these first missionaries.

In the 1990's a small group of Dominican sisters, at the behest of the General Chapter of their Congregation and tapping into the courage and faith of their founding mothers, set about establishing an ecological project in Wicklow. At their disposal was a 70-acre farm, a disused farmyard and the promise of moral and financial support from the Congregation. Wisely they consulted the local community who contributed their expertise in farming, forestry and other local knowledge. Research was done on other similar projects in England and the United States.

It became clear that this project would require full time knowledgeable personnel. It was then that Sr. Julie Newman resigned her position as Principal of Dominican College, Wicklow and spent time in the US studying and visiting ecological projects in that country. She returned to Wicklow in January 1998 with our good friend and mentor, Dominican sister, Miriam Therese MacGillis of Genesis Farm, New Jersey.



Early days: *Left to right:* Sr. Julie Newman, Sr. Marian O'Sullivan, Sr. Pauline McGrath, Sr. Vivienne O'Beirne.



Friends of An Tairseach helping on the land.



Award Winning Grower, Dermot Carey in a polytunnel.



Tennis court converted to Cosmic Garden.



Ecology Centre foyer being built.



Farmyard and Farm Shop renovated.



During 1998 they drew up a five-year plan with three objectives. It would consist of: An organic farm, a wild-life conservation area and an ecological education centre.

## 1. Organic Farm

The first part to be developed was the organic farm. The ground had to be cleared of chemicals, fences had to be repaired, the soil had to be restored to fertility and application made for organic status. It takes two years to convert land to organic production. During that waiting time the farmyard was repaired and a house refurbished for the new farm manager and his wife who would soon move in.

The first manager, Peter Bateman, was a trained biodynamic farmer so we decided to go that route also. Farming biodynamically means being aware that the Earth is only part of a much greater whole and that what happens on this planet is influenced in a very real way by the movement of the other heavenly bodies. We all know that the moon affects the tides but there is much more to it than that. There are therefore recommended times for sowing and for harvesting so that the energy in the food so produced is at its best. Biodynamic farming is well established in Germany, Australia and other parts of the world but is almost unknown in Ireland. For a number of years we were certified as biodynamic farmers but the biodynamic certifying body closed down in Ireland and so we became members of the Organic Trust.



Pond established - Sr. Julie Newman and Sr. Colette Kane taking Sabbatical participants for a walk over the farmland.



Dermot Carey taking produce to market.



Volunteer, Anne Daly (centre), with sabbatical group in newest wood.



## 2. Conservation

During this time also the ten acres of land set aside for conservation was being developed. Ten thousand indigenous trees were planted, a stream walk was constructed, a wild-life pond established and hedgerows improved. The plan for the farm was to begin with growing organic vegetables and selling them through our own farm shop. The people of the town were delighted to see a new project come alive in the “convent” and many of them helped with the tree planting, potato picking and other tasks. Now several years later we have a thriving farm shop, carrying a wide variety of fruit, vegetables, organic beef and pork as well as health foods and ecological hygiene products and cleaning materials. It is open five days a week.

## 3. Ecology Centre

The third part of the An Tairseach project was the development of the Centre for Ecology and Spirituality so when I joined Julie Newman in 1999 that became my responsibility. Located in refurbished buildings on the campus, the Centre opened in 2005 providing classroom and conference space as well as residential accommodation. The building is heated by wood pellets and we have some solar panels for water heating. Here we offer a full programme of courses for adults and children which could broadly be described as covering Ecology and Spirituality.

In our offerings, we seek to make available to people the best current scientific knowledge of how our wonderful universe came to be, and our place in it. We share the insights of 20th century prophets like Teilhard de Chardin in the West and Sri Aurobindo in the East who saw that the unfolding of the universe

is both a physical and spiritual evolution. They and others show us convincingly that spirit and matter are two sides of the one coin. They are inseparable.

The courses offered at An Tairseach can vary from *Summer Courses for Teachers, Enrichment Days for School Staffs, Programmes for Schools, Growing Organic Vegetables, Vegetarian and Other Forms of Cooking, Digital Detox, Spirituality through Art, Sacred Dance, Meditation, Retreats*, or they may just offer people an opportunity to reflect on the interconnectedness of all creation in a beautiful setting of sea, mountains, streams and woodlands.

Other courses are more explicitly philosophical and intellectual in approach. A ten-week full-time, residential sabbatical programme provides an opportunity to explore theology and spirituality in the context of our evolving universe, the danger to our planet, and the challenge of living more sustainably on the Earth while adapting to an oil-poor future.

To involve the body and to engage the deeper aesthetic senses, we use ritual, art, music and movement to help us internalise our questions and our experience. For example, there is the ‘cosmic garden’ which marks the major moments in the epic of evolution on a spiral on the ground. We invite people to ‘walk’ this spiral path, to gain some sense of the vastness of the time it took the Universe to create first the stars, then the planets including planet Earth, and finally, to burst forth into life itself. In contrast, the Peace Garden and the Oasis hermitage invite people to enter into the inner world which is as mysterious and deep as the outer world is astonishing.



Farm Shop.



Sr. Julie Newman introducing ponies Billy and Bobby to visitors.





Cosmic Garden and Cosmic Walk.



Peace Garden in the cottage grounds.



Oasis hermitage, a quiet place.



Farm Manager, Janice Codd.



An Tairseach and garden.



# Threshold

We chose the name An Tairseach for our project. The Irish word for threshold seemed to describe well the moment we were living through. We were at an in-between time in terms of how we understood our place in the world. Many of us had come to believe that the planet belonged to us, humans, and that we could do with it what we liked. Yet the "Universe Story" told us that we had only recently arrived on the planet and that the Earth had survived and thrived very well before we evolved. Geotheologian, Thomas Berry, noted that we are in between stories. In the past we understood the Earth to be just matter. It had no soul. It was there for our use and sadly for our abuse. Human beings had souls and an eternal destiny. All other creatures were there to serve us. In other words we were Lords of the Universe.

Now we are beginning to realise that every living being has intrinsic worth, that life at every level is mysterious. All of creation emerged from that one event which we have called the Big Bang, everything is connected, indeed all is One. Ever since the astronauts, on a journey to the moon, saw the Earth as a whole for the first time, there has been a growing awareness that our planet is very small, very beautiful and very fragile. The notion that it can rightly be carved up into sovereign states, that we have absolute rights to extract its minerals, create hazardous waste, burn its fossil fuels, pollute its air and water and change its climate is no longer

tenable. Climate change is now widely recognised as a serious threat to the future of the planet. A radical re-thinking of the role of the human in the cosmic scheme of things is urgently needed, and a radical restructuring is required. Ecologist Thomas Berry says:

*"The Earth simply cannot sustain the burden imposed upon it. The air in many places has become polluted. The water of the planet is toxic for an indefinite period of time. The soils of the Earth are saturated with chemicals. We have only the slightest idea of the consequences for the physical and psychic life of the human community, especially for the children who have lived in this chemically saturated environment since the day of their conception."*

*Physical degradation of the natural world is also the degradation of the interior world of the human. To cut the old-growth forests is not simply to destroy the last five percent of the primordial forests left in this country. It is to lose the wonder and majesty, the poetry, music, and spiritual exaltation evoked by such awesome experience of the deep mysteries of existence. It is a loss of soul even more than a loss of lumber or a loss of money."*<sup>2</sup>

*"We have not inherited the earth from our parents but borrowed it from our children."*  
- Native North American Indian philosophy

2. Thomas Berry, *The Great Work*, Bell Tower, New York 1999, p.110.



Sr. Margaret Purcell helping out in the Eco-shop.



Summer Solstice celebration in the Cosmic Garden.



Nature's cathedral, woodland at An Tairseach.





*"The entire evolution process depends on communion." - Thomas Berry*

Dominican Convent Chapel with Harry Clarke Studio stained glass windows.



Harry Clarke Studio stained glass detail.



Walking the labyrinth in the chapel.



Sabbatical ritual of New Beginnings.



# We Are One

So we are brought full circle, to confront as St. Dominic did the falsity of dualism, the thirteenth century heresy the Order was founded to combat, in order to reclaim the ancient truth that all is one, and that all of creation is good. If St. Dominic were alive today, he would without doubt be calling on his followers, both women and men, to become fully cognisant of the insights of modern science and to reflect on them in their search for truth.

At *An Tairseach*, therefore, we try to offer people a holistic experience. Within the context of a working organic farm, people see how vegetables are grown without the use of artificial chemicals, cattle are raised out of doors except in extreme weather, enjoying the lush grass of the farm and suckling their own young. The food served in the dining room comes from the farm as far as possible and is prepared with care and eaten with gratitude.

Wild-life habitats are preserved and enhanced so as to witness to the importance of making every effort to counteract the loss of bio-diversity being caused by modern farming methods as well as creeping housing development. Aware that the world bee population is under threat we have invested in six hives as our small contribution to protecting these amazing creatures who are also so necessary for human food production.

*"The universe is an inexhaustible celebration of ultimate mystery!"* - Brian Swimme



Beehives in the Cosmic Garden.



Certified organic produce.



Cattle on the farmland overlooking Wicklow Bay.



From farm to fork.



Organically fed pigs.

# Crossing the Threshold

What wisdom is available to us as we move from an old world-view which saw the Earth simply as inert matter, a resource for our use, to an awareness that we are participants with the rest of the community of life in the psycho-spiritual reality we call Mother Earth? In his book, *The Great Work*, Thomas Berry points to the fourfold wisdom to guide us into the future: the wisdom of science, the wisdom of the indigenous peoples, the wisdom of women and the wisdom of the mystics.<sup>3</sup> These are the fourfold wisdoms that have also guided us here at An Tairseach, as we designed our courses especially the sabbatical programme.

## The Wisdom of Science

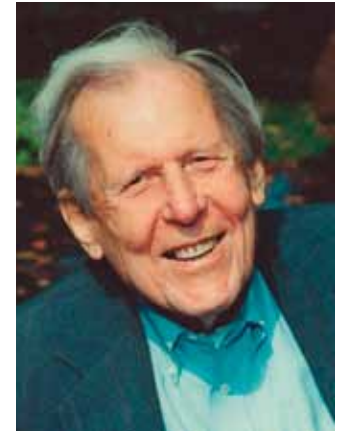
From the time that Galileo fell foul of the authorities by saying that the Earth was not the centre of the universe, science and religion parted company which was to the detriment of both. Science became pre-occupied with the material universe while religion became more and more personal, concentrating on the relationship between God and the individual person. Jesuit paleontologist, poet and mystic, Teilhard de Chardin, became the first person in modern times in the West to attempt a synthesis of science and religion. That of course was not entirely new. In the early church and up to the mediaeval period, theology was about God, humanity and the natural world. Thomas Aquinas taught that any misunderstanding of the natural world would mean a misunderstanding of God.

What is new is that Science now has a wholly new understanding of how the world works. Teilhard de Chardin reflected on these matters and in so doing began to challenge the accepted doctrine which was based on a static view of a universe that was fixed and unchanging. His work on fossils demonstrated to him that the material world was constantly changing. Humanity needed to come to terms with an evolving universe which in turn would lead us to a different understanding of who or what God is. In the 13th century Thomas Aquinas had asked not, "Who is God" but "What is God?" Understandably Teilhard's revolutionary views were not widely accepted and it was not until after his death in 1955 that his writings became widely available.

Thomas Berry, whom we have frequently quoted, was profoundly influenced by Teilhard's thought. We, at An Tairseach, were introduced to Thomas Berry's writings by Dominican Miriam Therese MacGillis when some of us studied with her at Genesis Farm, New Jersey and later when she came to stay temporarily in Wicklow. We want to acknowledge here our debt to her as well as to Teilhard and Thomas Berry who have influenced us in our own lives and in the courses we have shared with hundreds of other people from all over the planet. When planning An Tairseach we were also inspired by Fr. Sean McDonagh, a Columban missionary, who was a pioneer in writing and lecturing about environmental issues here and abroad.



Pierre Teilhard de Chardin.



Thomas Berry.



Miriam Therese MacGillis op.



Sean McDonagh ssc.

*"The presence of the incarnate word shines at the heart of all creation." - Teilhard de Chardin*

3. Berry, *The Great Work*, Bell Tower, New York 1999, p.176.



## The Wisdom of the Indigenous Peoples

There are 200 million indigenous people still alive today whose ancestors lived for thousands of years in harmony with Mother Earth and her seasons, but who struggle now to maintain their way of life in an increasingly hostile world. In Ireland our indigenous forebears were the Megalithic people who built large stone monuments like Newgrange all over this country displaying an amazing knowledge of the movements of the heavenly bodies and an equally amazing skill in constructing vast structures aligned to receive the first rays of the sun on the Winter Solstice as in Newgrange or on the Spring equinox as in nearby Knowth. It is widely acknowledged that these monuments were places of worship, an acknowledgement that there is a "world beyond" where the dead live on. The fine line between this world and the other world they called the "Tairseach". The Celts arrived in Ireland from central Europe about 500 BCE and mingled with the Megalithic peoples. Today we tend to refer to them all as Celts and their spirituality as Celtic. At An Tairseach we always include a module on Celtic Spirituality in our sabbatical programmes.

## The Wisdom of Women

In their search for the meaning of life and observing that women were the givers of life, our ancestors on all continents, concluded that the divine was feminine. Archaeological finds demonstrate that they worshipped the Goddess, the divine feminine. Societies were egalitarian until the advent of the agricultural revolution when God was presumed to

be male and women became second class citizens. In our time, as women become more educated, they have begun to reclaim their place as equals and to find ways to make their specifically feminine contribution to the welfare of all the community of life. At An Tairseach we honour the wisdom of women as we explore our images of God who is neither male nor female. Indeed all our images of God are but feeble attempts to understand something of God who is Ultimate Mystery.

## The Wisdom of the Mystics

In recent centuries the Christian Churches have tended to pass on the faith by means of theological teaching and reflection on Scripture. But there is also another source of wisdom, that of the mystics, dating back to the early church and flourishing at various times, as it were in waves. Many of the mystics who have come down to us were women and they weren't always appreciated partly because they tended to be very confident that they had direct access to God without the mediation of others. We think of Marguerite Porette who insisted that she was one with God and God was one with her and was burned at the stake in 1310 in Paris for her daring views. Or Catherine of Genoa who said "my real me is God."<sup>4</sup> There was also Hildegard of Bingen, abbess, theologian, mystic who was airbrushed out of history until recently and a host of others too numerous to mention but who provide a rich resource for us as we try to navigate our way out of a theology based on a static view of the universe to a more dynamic one. Many of the forgotten mystics were women but some were men such as Dominican Meister Eckhart,



The Divine Feminine, painted by Sr. Pauline McGrath.



Visiting Newgrange Neolithic Passage Tomb.



Sr. Helen Mary Harmey and Ecology Centre Manager Kate Duggan (front) with Sabbatical participants at the annual Seder meal.

4. Mary T. Malone, *Praying with the Women Mystics*, Dublin, The Columba Press, p.33.

himself a theologian as well as a mystic who directed many of these medieval women and also learned from them. He it was who said that “all creatures are the utterances of God”<sup>5</sup> or in other of his words “every single creature is a book about God”.

## Laudato si

Our greatest encouragement since 2015 has been Pope Francis’s encyclical *Laudato si*. This is a wide ranging and inspirational document which is now part of the Catholic church’s social teaching. The encyclical is an urgent appeal for a new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet. Using the best available scientific research, the Pope discusses issues such as climate change, water and air pollution, the loss of biodiversity, highlighting in particular how poor and vulnerable communities suffer the worst consequences. He goes on to say:

“It is not enough, however, to think of different species merely as potential “resources” to be exploited while overlooking the fact that they have value in themselves. Each year sees the disappearance of thousands of plant and animal species which we will never know, which our children will never see, because they have been lost forever. The great majority become extinct for reasons related to human activity. Because of us, thousands of species will no longer give glory to God by their very existence, nor convey their message to us. We have no such right.”

(Laudato si: Par 33).

The Pope goes on to acknowledge:

“Here I want to recognise, encourage and thank all those striving in countless ways to guarantee the

protection of the home which we share. Particular appreciation is owed to those who tirelessly seek to resolve the tragic effects of environmental degradation on the lives of the world’s poorest. Young people demand change. They wonder how anyone can claim to be building a better future without thinking of the environmental crisis and the sufferings of the excluded” (L.S. par 13).

These are the influences, then, that shape our programmes at *An Tairseach*. Through them we seek to discharge our Dominican responsibility to highlight the search for truth as essential for all humans if we are to live up to our calling as the self-conscious dimension of planet Earth. No other species has that responsibility. For us, therefore, not to include the insights of modern scientific discovery in our quest would be a betrayal of trust.

We are both encouraged and challenged in our continuing quest by the words of Elizabeth Johnson:

“The neglect of the cosmos by recent decades of mainstream Catholic theology has two deleterious results. It enfeebles theology in its basic task of interpreting the whole of reality in the light of faith, thereby compromising the intellectual integrity of theology. And it blocks what should be theology’s powerful contribution to the religious praxis of justice and mercy for a threatened earth, so necessary at this moment of our planet’s unprecedented ecological crisis, thereby endangering the moral integrity of theology”.<sup>6</sup>



Mark McDonnell cfc, after his weekly Cosmology class.



Sr. Pauline McGrath (far right) with a sabbatical group.



Sr. Vivienne O'Beirne collecting flowers from the garden.

5. Meister Eckhart *Selected Writings* translated by Oliver Davies. London, Penguin 1994. Sermon DW 2, 53.

6. Elizabeth Johnson, CSJ. *Presidential Address to the Catholic Theological Society of America, 1995*.



*Laudato si* ends on a note of hope for ourselves and for the whole universe:

“At the end we will find ourselves face to face with the infinite beauty of God (cf 1 Cor 13:12) and be able to read with admiration and happiness the mystery of the universe, which with us will share in unending plenitude. Even now we are journeying towards the sabbath of eternity, the new Jerusalem, towards our common home in heaven. Jesus says: “I make all things new” (Rv 21:5) Eternal life will be a shared experience of awe, in which each creature, resplendently transfigured, will take its rightful place and have something to give these poor men and women who will have been liberated once and for all”  
(L.S par 243)

In doing our small part to redress neglect of the cosmos and look forward to a future full of hope, we at An Tairseach recognise that we are collaborating with growing numbers of committed persons around the globe who are also moving us into the ecological age.

**Marian O’Sullivan op**

Former Director of the Ecology Centre  
and Former Chair of the Board of Directors.



Sr. Marian O’Sullivan

Born in Co Cork, Marian O’Sullivan became a Dominican and was involved in education in South Africa for more than thirty years before being elected Prioress General of her congregation in 1986, a position she held until 1998. She then spent a year studying Ecology and Spirituality in the United States before returning to Ireland where she joined Julie Newman in Wicklow and was responsible for planning and developing the Ecology Centre.



Roses in the Peace Garden

# Consciousness Rising

This year, 2020, we celebrate 150 years of Dominican presence in Wicklow. It also marks the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Earth Day and five years since Pope Francis's encyclical *Laudato si* was released.

In all this we see a certain synchronicity in these anniversaries to be sure. One observation of our time is a rise in awareness about climate change, loss of biodiversity and plastic pollution. The storms Ophelia, the Beast from the East, Darwin and Desmond are not just weather but evidence of changing climate patterns in Ireland. Great fires across the arid areas of the planet, large enough to be observed from space, have become more frequent. As I write, we are in the midst of the COVID-19 global pandemic. Phrases such as 'self-isolate, and social distancing' have entered all our conversations and unprecedented challenges face humanity.

And there are new responses too. With her "School Strike for Climate" in August 2018, Greta Thunberg, a teenager from Sweden, started a protest in front of the Swedish parliament building. This went viral on social media and as support for her cause grew, other strikes started around the world, spreading with the hashtag *#FridaysForFuture*. Surely, Greta is a prophetic leader who 'walks the talk! Her walk has inspired the youth of the world (and the not so young) to also raise their voices. In 2019, London was crippled by the Extinction Rebellion (XR) protests. XR is now also a global environmental movement with the stated aim of using nonviolent, civil disobedience

to compel government action in order to avoid tipping points in the climate system, biodiversity loss, and the risk of social and ecological collapse.

Ecclesially, a Synod on the Amazon was held in October 2019. Bishops assembled in Rome for "Amazonia: New Paths for the Church and for Integral Ecology". At the heart of the synod process and the final document is a call to **conversion** at the pastoral, cultural and ecological levels. And Francis reactivated this at the synodal level. This special synod—the first Synod of Bishops to be organized around a distinct ecological territory, the Pan-Amazonian Region—sought to put into practice the *Laudato si'* goal of an "integral ecology" and care for our common home. The call is for a profound **conversion** on many levels: intellectual, moral and spiritual.

## Holistic Education

In many respects An Tairseach continues to evolve as a witness to and partner in dialogue with modern culture, science and religion. We continue to read the 'signs of the times' aware that this is an evolving dialogue and the process necessarily on-going. In tandem with activism in the area of shared commitment, the educational dimension of An Tairseach is still essential to our work. Engendering a community of learning, where participants find the resources to discover and develop their deeply held commitments to humanity, culture, and knowledge is still central. The new dialogues



Sr. Colette Kane with Ecology Centre Staff.



Gardening class with Wendy Nairn.



Fr. Michael Rodgers with group at Mount Usher Gardens.





View of the farmland on the hill and organic vegetable garden - before the Oasis was restored.



Eco Congregation Award presented to An Tairseach.



Sr Pauline McGrath with Art student Hilary Byrne.



Sr. Jeanette Kiely taking care of the library.



between contemporary culture/society, science and religion are ever changing, and as Dominicans we have recognised the current urgent need for literacy about the nature-society relationship. There are valid challenges to our inherited structures for living and a need to reinterpret our traditional beliefs about the source of the universe, creation itself and the place of humans within it, theologically and philosophically.

The original work of An Tairseach is needed as urgently as ever - exploring spirituality in the context of a remarkable evolving universe, an endangered Earth and in the Christian tradition. We continue to probe how new insights in scientific cosmology can inform our commitments, religious rituals, preaching and ministries and life choices. *Ecological Conversion* from an excessive anthropocentrism to an appreciation that we are participants together and interconnected is vital for the future well-being of the whole community of life. Such conversion will nurture an understanding and appreciation of the unique place humans inhabit in the web of life. Openness to the potential of being transformed by and participating in new knowledge and wisdom is a greater need than ever before. Elizabeth Johnson states clearly "We need to fathom that the human species is embedded as an intrinsic, interdependent part of the magnificence of this universe, not as lords of the manor but kin in the community of life, charged with being sisters and brothers, friends and lovers, mothers and fathers, priests and prophets, co-creators and children of the earth that is God's good creation."<sup>7</sup>

The many programmes, retreats and courses hosted by An Tairseach continue to attract participation from near and far. Since we updated the website and developed a presence on social media we have seen a great increase in the number and variety of groups availing of the beautiful and activity-filled environs of the Centre and gardens. Vegetables grown on the farm are prepared for our meals and make real the integrated life that the programmes support. And An Tairseach continues to fulfil its role as a social enterprise, facilitating the needs of the local community in Wicklow, in education and in community practice.

### Touch the Earth with Gentleness

Some overarching ecological trends continue at pace such as climate chaos and biodiversity loss. According to the WWF, *Living Planet Report* of 2018, habitat loss is a major threat to biodiversity. Declines in species are accelerating rather than slowing. There is also a deepening disconnect between conservation and farming sectors. And the rapid suburbanisation of highly productive farmland continues. Development of an ethic for the land, first described by Aldo Leopold in 1947, is still piecemeal in many countries. The rise of Veganism from a fringe movement into mainstream is driving a change of thinking about plant-based diets instead of ones based on animals. Let us hope that we will continue to find and promote sustainable and more ethical ways of producing food in 'circular patterns' of production. In primary schools, teachers of young children have made us aware of the rise in the condition called 'climate anxiety'. This may be



Sabbatical group visiting Glendalough Monastic Site in Wicklow.



Participants on the Teacher's Course exploring the farmland.



Donna Carolan planting Sweet Peas.

7. Elizabeth A. Johnson, 'Losing and Finding Creation in the Christian Tradition', *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-Being of Earth and Human*, edited by D. T. Hessel and R., Radford Ruether. Cambridge Harvard University Press: Massachusetts, 2000, 8.



due to greater awareness of climate chaos or less engagement with nature or the rise in Internet disconnection.

In An Tairseach facilitating tours, educating people about healthy soil, and our commitment to modelling sustainable patterns of food production continues. Promoting and facilitating new ways of connecting with the land and nature such as Forest schools, Nature Way Education, the Incredible Edibles programme (a healthy eating initiative for primary school children) and demonstrations of 'farm to fork' are all part of our explorations.

Sometimes during seasonal celebrations such as solstice and equinox, often inspired by Sr. Pauline McGrath, we sing and dance to a prayer by Cathy Sherman CSJ; "Touch the Earth with gentleness, touch the earth with love, touch her with the future by the way you live today. God has given us the power to create the world anew, if we touch the earth together, me and you." Such expressions of connection and actions are invigorating. As Aldo Leopold advocated, "When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect."

### "The Great Work"

In An Tairseach we continuously reflect on our deepening reverence for each other and our desecration of planet earth. Through prayer, study, education and reflection we seek to invite people with rituals that embody the insights and convictions that lead to transformed behaviour. In the book of Genesis, God tells Adam to 'pay attention' and

name the creatures (attention is the beginning of devotion). The same invitation comes from Charles Darwin in his book, *On the Origin of Species*, where he begins with the phrase 'when we look'. Thomas Berry also maintained that 'The Great Work' before humankind is to appreciate rather than exploit the world around us. Why such attention? It is the way to better understand our place and take small steps to regain our wonder, appreciation and respect for all of creation. Then we can make real a presence characterised by mutuality and reciprocity, for the whole community of life on Earth.

In her widely read book *Active Hope*, environmental activist Joanna Macy asked the question 'What is ours to do?' She holds out the possibility of a shared human collective transition, or 'Great Turning' to a life-sustaining society. The response in An Tairseach is to invite wonder, astonishment, celebration, gratitude and praise; to promote healthy organic/sustainable eating habits and conservation of the land; and not least the enjoyment of walking amongst trees for '*whichever way you turn, there is the face of God*'.

**Colette Kane op**

Director of An Tairseach Ecology Centre



Teachers' Course participants in the Farm Shop with Farm Manager Janice Codd (far right).



Sr. Colette Kane teaching children about Incredible Edibles.

# Endorsement

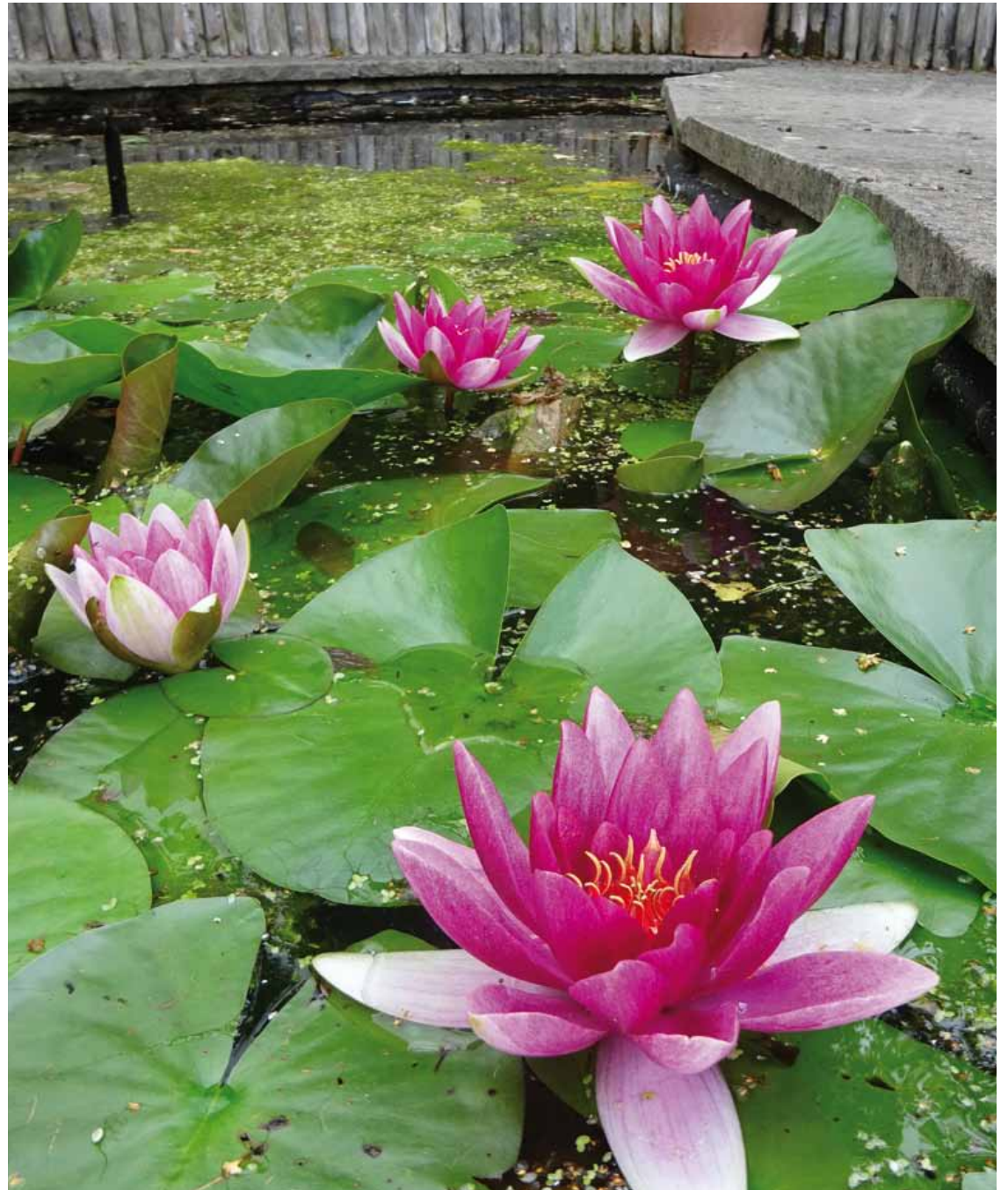


Mary Evelyn Tucker, who with her husband John Grimm is the biographer of Thomas Berry, wrote of the occasion of her visit to An Tairseach on 29 June, 2019 where they presented at the Conference to celebrate the Summer Solstice on the 10th anniversary of Thomas Berry's death:

The unique work in Ireland at Wicklow Town's An Tairseach deserves to be celebrated and replicated. For many years the Dominican sisters there have dedicated themselves to some of the most important work of our time - organic farming, integrated conservation and ecospirituality. With the help of Miriam Therese MacGillis of Genesis Farm in the United States, the sisters carried out a plan over several decades that has become a touchstone for others. There are few places that have done more for the restoration of human-Earth relations for our beautiful Earth community. This Great Work, born of inspiring vision and grounded faith, has resulted in a shining beacon for many to support and cherish into the future.

## **Mary Evelyn Tucker**

Co-founder and co-director of the Forum on Religion and Ecology at Yale University with her husband, John Allan Grim.



Waterlilies in the Cosmic Garden pond.





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