

LAUDATO SI' AND THE GIVING OF THE SPIRITUAL EXERCISES

An Australian Perspective

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Creation is of the order of love. God's love is the fundamental moving force in all created things (n. 77).

A FEW YEARS AGO I was bushwalking along a part of the Larapinta Trail with my son and daughter and her partner. The Larapinta Trail, some 220 km in length, meanders through the West McDonald Ranges in central Australia, beginning just outside Alice Springs. This was the first time that I had been to the Northern Territory, and it was hot and dry. After three days of walking I was feeling dehydrated, my knee was sore and I had blisters on both feet. That evening we pitched our tent on the dry bed of the Finke River. It is very wide, and in January that year it had been flowing strongly after significant rain and swelled by flood waters coming down from the north of Australia. But in August it was dry. It was a great place to camp, as the sandy ground was soft to sleep on. That night, because it was mild, I decided not to put the fly over the tent, and slept under the clear night sky looking up at the Milky Way as it spread across the heavens. The Finke River is one of the oldest rivers in Australia. Archaeologists suggest that its course has not changed in 300 million years. In the stillness of that night, lying on this ancient riverbed and looking up at a universe that is billions of years old, I felt profound awe at the wonder of God's creation. Over the years that I have been walking in the wilderness in Australia I have come to appreciate more and more the presence of God in nature.

When we fan the flame of wonder in our hearts there is new meaning in our lives. Our hearts expand in care for those who journey with us and for

*our planet Earth which is our home. To be aware of the summer breeze, the beauty of a flower, the smile of a friend, or the sparkle of a wave in flight, is a gift beyond price. It is the gift of wonder enfolded in awe.*¹

So I was excited when I heard that Pope Francis was publishing an encyclical on the environment. Fortuitously I was coordinating and supervising the Spiritual Exercises as a thirty-day silent retreat at the Campion Centre of Ignatian Spirituality in Melbourne when the encyclical was published. As I read it during the retreat I found myself reflecting on what *Laudato si'* would mean for the way a director gave the Spiritual Exercises.

The Exercises are primarily a spiritual journey of the *exercitant*, the one who makes the Exercises, deepening his or her experience of God and entering into greater intimacy with Jesus in a way that transforms the person's heart. Out of this intimacy grows the deep desire to live a life serving Christ in the world in that person's unique way, as he or she feels called. Over the years that I have been giving or supervising the Spiritual Exercises, according to either the Nineteenth or Twentieth Annotation,² I do not recollect the issue of 'caring for our common home' being raised by exercitants. I do not recall exercitants, after praying the *Contemplatio*, speaking about what they were going to do to change the way they lived so as to care for the earth more, or what they were going to do in the parish or their wider social community. My observation is that this has not been a serious issue in the Exercises. Yet now Pope Francis is saying it is a crucial issue at both the spiritual and social levels.

If Ignatius was here today I believe he would be just as concerned as Pope Francis about caring for nature. Ignatius had a great love of nature. He had his most profound mystical experience at Manresa as he 'sat down for a little with his face towards the [Cardoner] river, which was running deep below'.³ After his conversion Ignatius spent a great deal of time walking long distances across Europe, before he settled in Rome. I imagine that these journeys on foot through nature, necessary and commonplace before modern roads and transport systems, were part of Ignatius' spiritual journey, just as journeys on foot have been in mine. In Rome he would

¹ Jacinta Shailer, *Wildflower Journey Prayers: A Collection of Readings and Prayers with Photography* (East Kew, Victoria: David Lovell, 2007), 27.

² That is, the Exercises made in daily life (Nineteenth Annotation) or the full thirty-day retreat (Twentieth Annotation).

³ *Autobiography*, n. 30.

be in tears when he prayed at night from his balcony looking up at the stars. I believe that the presence of God in nature was something that Ignatius took for granted in the *Spiritual Exercises*. In his time nature was something of which ordinary people were more aware in their daily lives than they are today.

Nature cannot be regarded as something separate from ourselves or as a mere setting in which we live (n. 139).

As Pope Francis points out, we have come to view nature as the vehicle for our own self interest (nn. 161–162). In our affluent society we use a great deal of fossil-fuel energy to support our lifestyle and comfort. In Australia there is a reliance on coal for the vast majority of our electrical energy, even though science is clear about the significant carbon dioxide emissions that come from burning coal. We have relied on coal because it is plentiful in Australia and cheap to use for producing electricity compared to other means. These practices began in the early twentieth century, when we were ignorant about the effects of carbon dioxide emissions on the climate and the planet. But, as Pope Francis shows, they also reflect a particular attitude to life that is inherently anthropocentric, so much so that it has become part of our unconscious psyche—we are not even aware that we are acting this way in the world. And for the most part this is also how people come to the *Spiritual Exercises* today. Pope Francis' encyclical is about asking people all over the world to wake up to the way we are living.

Many people will deny doing anything wrong because distractions dull our consciousness of just how limited and finite our world really is (n. 56).

In Melbourne, which is regarded as one of the most 'liveable' cities in the world, it is quite possible to isolate oneself completely from nature.⁴ I can live in a house that is insulated, centrally heated and air-conditioned so that I do not have to experience the vagaries of the weather outside. When I do go out, I am likely to travel in a car that also has heating and air-conditioning. When I get to work I may sit in an office where the windows are never open and the temperature is constantly regulated. This is a society that is filled with noise and artificial light 24 hours a day.

⁴ See *The Economist Intelligence Unit*, 'A Summary of the Liveability Ranking and Overview, August 2014', available at <http://www.eiu.com/Handlers/WhitepaperHandler.ashx?fi=Liveability-rankings-Promotional-August-2014.pdf&mode=wp&campaignid=Liveability2014>, accessed 7 August 2015.



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Melbourne by night

Many young people growing up in the big cities of Australia do not play outside or experience nature in the wilderness. They spend their time in front of the television, the computer or video games. On public transport in Melbourne nearly everyone seems to be engrossed in technology. The technology of our time dominates our world: the internet, smart phones, social media, texting, streaming videos and music, instant communication. This insulation from nature tends to mean that 'my welfare' comes first. It also has the effect of insulating me from my neighbour. It is from this context that many people come to the Spiritual Exercises today.

As often occurs in periods of deep crisis which require bold decisions, we are tempted to think that what is happening is not entirely clear Such evasiveness serves as a licence to carrying on with our present lifestyles.
(n.59)

Ignatius understood that the spiritual journey seeks interior freedom to be able to listen to how God calls each and everyone of us to live. To do this requires that we free ourselves from our *disordered attachments*. Hence Ignatius initially developed the Spiritual Exercises as a thirty-day silent retreat, in which exercitants withdrew from the busyness of everyday life in the society to listen to the movement of God's Spirit within their hearts. In silence I can attend more carefully to my inner responses to life and to Jesus. At Campion we follow this tradition. On the thirty-day retreat that we conduct each year most of the exercitants are seminarians, usually young adults. They come to the retreat with all their technology. They often find entering the silence difficult. In the initial stages of the

retreat they can find it challenging not to connect to the internet, not to look at Facebook or their e-mail, not to use their smartphones. A few find it hard to stop talking. By the end of the retreat most are grateful for having done these things, and for discovering a deeper part of themselves and Jesus.

The question I have in giving the Spiritual Exercises now is: if an exercitant completes the Exercises without an increased awareness of the need to care for the earth and the poor, has the process been effective in today's world? I do not think so any more. Ignatian spirituality is about being 'contemplatives in action' and 'finding God in all things'. Caring for our planet is part of a Christian's journey.

Christians in their turn 'realise that their responsibility within creation, and their duty towards nature and the Creator, are an essential part of their faith' (n.64).⁵

So where does *Laudato si'* fit into this journey of the Exercises? How can the importance of 'caring for our common home' be explored through them? In the First Week it would not be difficult to adapt some of the meditations on sin to focus on how our personal life contributes to damaging the earth. The Jesuit Joseph Carver has created an 'Ecological Examen' that would be helpful in this:

The five movements in the ecological examen parallel the traditional examen. We begin with thanksgiving and gratitude for all creation, which reflects the beauty and blessing of God's image. We ask: Where was I most aware of this gift today? Second, we specifically request to have our eyes opened by the Spirit as to how we might protect and care for creation. Third, we review the challenges and joys experienced in this care, asking: How was I drawn into God today through creation? How was I being invited to respond to God's action in creation? Fourth, we ask for a true and clear awareness of our sinfulness, whether it be a sense of superiority and arrogance in our relationship to creation or a failure to respond to God in the needs of creation. Finally, we end in hope: asking for hope in the future, asking for the grace to see the incarnate Christ in the dynamic interconnections of all creation.⁶

The director could also give exercitants some excerpts from Pope Francis's encyclical as texts for reflection.

⁵ Quoting John Paul II, 'Message for the 1990 World Day of Peace', n. 15.

⁶ See Joseph P. Carver, 'The Ecological Examen', *America* (21 April 2014).

In the Second Week of the Exercises the journey with Jesus in his human life is significant for exercitants. Here the director could use more of the scripture passages that focus on Jesus and nature, either in the parables or in his daily life, looking at Jesus not only as a man of the people but also a man of the land. The meditations of the Second Week, such as the Two Standards, could be adapted to encourage the exercitant to reflect on the different ways of living in the context of the encyclical.

In the Third Week, exercitants enter with Jesus into his suffering and death on the cross. They are confronted not only with Jesus' human suffering and death, but also with their own mortality. This brings into focus the life cycle of nature for all species: birth, life and death. In our postmodern society, where the emphasis is on living for today, we find it difficult to face up to suffering and death.⁷ In the Third Week, as a way into the suffering of Jesus, exercitants can be encouraged to reflect on their experience of suffering and death in nature.

In the Fourth Week, the focus shifts to the resurrection of Jesus: after death there is new life, new hope. We see this in nature constantly. Inviting exercitants to reflect on their experience of the seasons of the year—and particularly spring—can enable them to appreciate significance of the Risen Christ for them. Praying the *Contemplatio* could involve reflection on the gift of God's presence in nature as the exercitants have experienced it in their lives and the gratitude it brings. Then there might be a focus on what the exercitants could do for Christ in the world in caring for our common home, the Earth. In his book *The New Spiritual Exercises*, Louis Savary reimagines the Exercises 'as Teilhard [de Chardin] might envision and re-create them if he were alive today'.⁸ He encourages the exercitant to take seriously what he calls the 'Christ Project', by asking them to consider how they will act in the world today to care for the planet. 'God's Christ Project', he writes, 'encompasses the entire evolving universe, and its aim is to bring creation (along with all of us) back to God, fully conscious of our divine origin and divine destiny'.⁹

While these adaptations would be helpful, I think another, more radical way of enhancing exercitants' awareness of the presence of God in nature through the Exercises is to develop a retreat in which they spend part or all of the retreat walking in the wilderness.

⁷ See Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973).

⁸ Louis Savary, *The New Spiritual Exercises: In the Spirit of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin* (New York: Paulist, 2010), ix.

⁹ Savary, *New Spiritual Exercises*, xii.



East Alligator River, Kakadu National Park, Northern Territory, Australia

The challenge for giving the Exercises in Australia, in the light of Pope Francis's encyclical, is to take exercitants out into the wilderness, to the rainforests, Eucalypt forests, ocean coastlines and peninsulas, and the central and western deserts: those parts of the country that have retained the landscapes that existed before European settlement. The Aboriginal people did use the land, but they were respectful in the way they did so. For them right relationship with the land was integral to the way they lived. Today most of the diverse landscapes that they knew before European settlement are protected in national parks right across Australia.

The universe unfolds in God, who fills it completely. Hence, there is a mystical meaning to be found in a leaf, in a mountain trail, in a dew drop, in a poor person's face. (n.233)

Why do this? In his encyclical Pope Francis, like John Paul II and Benedict VI, suggests that we need an 'ecological conversion' (nn.216–221) to foster in the world the presence of God in the Earth, in all creatures, in all people. The Australian bishops have suggested that this conversion is necessary to achieve reconciliation with creation: '... we must examine our lives and acknowledge the ways in which we have harmed God's creation through our actions and our failure to act. We need to experience a conversion, or change of heart.' (n.218)¹⁰

¹⁰ Quoting the Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference, 'A New Earth: The Environmental Challenge'.

Ignatian spirituality is experiential: it invites a person to know the presence of God in the world deep in his or her heart. The Spiritual Exercises are not a theological course; they are a journey into the heart of the person and of God in that person. If we are going to help people to appreciate God's presence in nature then we have to invite them to experience it.

During my own days walking in the Red Centre of Australia I came to appreciate a bit more why the land of Australia is sacred to the Aboriginal people.¹¹ The priest Eugene Stockton, in speaking about indigenous people's sacred connection to the land, explains:

Through the wonders of creation is filtered the Wonder of the Creator shining through all that is made. In the presence of such wonders, *dadirri* is described as 'deep listening, silent awareness, quiet stillness', as Transcendence draws me out in wonder to all about me. It is also described as 'waiting' as Transcendence beckons me unhurriedly into the future. According to Aboriginal intuition, the land and all within it is alive, conscious and aware. It enjoys its own *dadirri*, and I can engage with the *dadirri* of the land. Out of this mutual attentiveness I sense with it a harmony, a mystical union and a cosmic wholeness, as it responds to my awareness, a totality that is still, alert, listening, waiting, knowing, loving.¹²

One aboriginal elder from the Kakadu area of central Australia, Bill Neidjie, spoke about the connection with the land:

I feel it with my body,
with my blood.
Feeling all these trees,
all this country.
When this wind blow you feel it

Feeling make you.
Out there in the open space,
he coming through your body.
Look while he blow and feel with your body,
because tree just about your brother and father
and tree is watching you.

¹¹ The Red Centre encompasses a vast area of the Northern Territory of Australia characterized by its striking red earth and rock, and containing sites such as Larapinta, Uluru and Kata Tjuta.

¹² Eugene Stockton, *Wonder: A Way to God* (Strathfield: St Pauls, 1988), 23–24.

Tree
 He watching you
 You look at tree,
 he listen to you

Earth.
 Like your father or brother or mother,
 Because you born from earth.
 You got to come back to earth.
 When you dead,
 you'll come back to earth
 That's your bone, your blood¹³

Francis of Assisi had something similar to say in his prayer the 'Canticle of the Creatures', which Pope Francis at the start of the encyclical: 'Praise be to you, my Lord, through our Sister, Mother Earth who sustains and governs us, and who produces various fruit with coloured flowers and herbs' (n. 1). What the indigenous people understood was that there is a spiritual dimension to life in the land that was integral to the way they lived with the country for 50,000 years. Unfortunately we, the foreign settlers of this land, have forgotten this integral spiritual dimension since the industrial revolution.

Living in the cities along the coastline of Australia, we have managed to disconnect ourselves from the spiritual dimension of the country. Taking people away from the city into the wilderness in an Ignatian way would encourage them to reconnect with the Spirit within them. Meeting God in the wilderness is a rich part of our Christian tradition.¹⁴ Moses met God in the burning bush in the desert, and was led by God through the wilderness after leaving Egypt. John the Baptist was the voice crying out in the wilderness, and Jesus was led into the wilderness by the Spirit for forty days, which became a time of significant discernment for him. For the early desert mothers and fathers of the Church the wilderness was the place where they encountered God.

The first thing you notice when you arrive in the wilderness in Australia is how quiet it is, devoid of the noise of the city. After a while you begin to notice new sounds that that attract your attention: different

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¹³ Bill Neidjie, *Gagudju Man*—Bill Neidjie, Kakadu National Park, Northern Territory, Australia (Marleston: Gecko Books, 2007), 39–40.

¹⁴ See Neil Vaney, *Christ in a Grain of Sand: An Ecological Journey with the Spiritual Exercises* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria, 2004).

birds singing, frogs in the creeks, the wind flowing through the Eucalypts, the sound of the earth as you walk along. Then, after some more time, you become aware of the silence that lives within the wilderness, a silence that brings calm to your heart. The Australian poet Noel Davis, who has written extensively on the landscape of this country, explains it this way:

It takes time to learn the ways of silence,
time to be with her and to let her touch
gentle your mind, your heart, your very being.¹⁵

It is in this silence in the wilderness where we truly meet God as the ground of our being.

Thus the creatures of this world no longer appear to us under merely natural guise because the risen One is mysteriously holding them to himself and directing them towards fullness as their end. (n. 100)

In the past fifteen years there has been an upsurge in ecotourism in Australia, as people from across the country and overseas seek out the unique experience of being in the wilderness. Of these an increasing number want to spend time walking in the wilderness. When we walked the Overland Track in Tasmania a few years ago we came across people from Germany, the USA, the Netherlands, the UK, China and Singapore. And there has been a growing interest in spiritual pilgrimage as well as ecotourism. In Spain more people are walking the Camino de Santiago; and an Ignatian Camino has been led in the last few years by the Jesuit Josep Ibierrri, involving a walk from Loyola to Montserrat and Manresa over 28 days. A number of people from Australia have made this pilgrimage.

Making the Spiritual Exercises in the wilderness, however, would not be a pilgrimage like the Camino de Santiago; it has a different dynamic. It is a structured process of spiritual formation proceeding over 30 days or 35 weeks. There are two main options for making a whole or part of the Spiritual Exercises in the wilderness in Australia. One is to live on the edge of the wilderness for the duration of the retreat and walk into the wilderness each day. The other is to spend the whole time walking through the wilderness during the retreat. And there may be other possibilities.

The most common way that people make the Spiritual Exercises at the Campion Centre is in the Nineteenth Annotation, over 35 weeks in

¹⁵ Noel Davis, *Heart Gone Walkabout* (Thornleigh: Shekinah Creative Ministry Co-Op, 1991), 22.

daily life. The vast majority of these are laypeople, mostly women. Praying with the meditations each day and speaking with their director each week suits the layperson's way of life. Yet one of the common adaptations that have occurred at Campion has been for the exercitant to come in and make part of the retreat as a live-in silent retreat. The feedback from the exercitants and the directors is that this is a very valuable experience. Even with Nineteenth Annotation retreats, therefore, it would be possible to make part of the Exercises as a walking retreat in the wilderness.

Pope Francis has declared that 1 September each year will now be a world day of Prayer for the Care of Creation. And we have just completed a month of prayer: the Season of Creation. Pope Francis is making it clear that *care for our common home* is a priority for the Church and the world. I believe it should therefore be a priority in the giving of the Spiritual Exercises, whereby the director should give serious consideration to how he or she will adapt the Exercises in a way that invites the exercitant to contemplate in the context of caring for the earth: What have I done for Christ? What am I doing for Christ? What will I do for Christ?

So what they all need is an 'ecological conversion', whereby the effects of their encounter with Jesus Christ becomes evident in their relationship with the world around them (n.217).

Peter Saunders has been a member of the retreat team at Campion Centre of Ignatian Spirituality in Melbourne for eighteen years. He works there as a spiritual director, pastoral psychotherapist, and supervisor. He is a keen bush walker and has a great interest in inviting people into the experience of God's presence in nature. In November 2015, along with two colleagues from Campion, he will lead a five-day walking retreat in Wilson's Promontory National Park in Victoria.