

Fr Seán McDonagh

What is the link between the Catholic Church and the Environment?

Key Concepts: Eco-Theologian, 'Biocide is a Sin'
Key Works: *Laudato Si* (Contributor with Pope Francis). *The Greening of the Church* (1990), *Laudato Si, and Irish Response* (2017)

"We need a conversation that includes everyone, since the environmental challenge we are undergoing, and its human roots, concern and affect us all." Pope Francis – *Laudato Si*

Fr McDonagh is an **ECO-THEOLOGIAN**

Relating to the Environment + The study of God and Divinity

But wait, I'm not Catholic. I don't even believe in 'god'. Why should I care about what some priest thinks?

This is a reasonable question. However, you don't have to believe in God to appreciate the fact that many others do. There are approximately 1.2 Billion Catholics in the world (40% of whom live in Latin America). If the Church can give positive leadership and example to those 1.2 Billion, and change their practices, surely this is something to be welcomed. At the end of the day, does it matter if somebody behaves more responsibly towards the environment because of scientific data, or because they have been instructed that 'Ecocide/Biocide is a SIN'? The 'Social Justice' message of Fr McDonagh, informed by his experiences in the Philippines, tells him that it is the people of the LDCs that suffer most from environmental disasters and climate change.

This work hasn't been easy for Fr McDonagh

It has taken him a lifetime to convince the Catholic church that this is part of their responsibility. He has been campaigning within the church since 1978, but has only recently gotten his agenda heard. "It's new for a lot of us. Most of the people who go to seminaries and into theology didn't actually deal with any of these issues, so there's a difficulty," He sees no contradiction between scientific and theological responses to Climate Change.

The only conclusion of this position is for all Catholics to accept that:
"Ecocide/Biocide is a SIN"

To ensure that this approach became permanent within the church, *Laudato Si* calls for an **"Ecological Conversion"**. This should not be seen as "*an optional or a secondary aspect of our Christian Experience.*" LS-217. It also seeks to balance science and faith, in a dialogue that is 'Fruitful for both'.

The 'Sin' of Biocide is generated (either passively or actively) by pursuit of Capitalist goals. This leads us to McDonagh's **Critique of Capitalist 'Consumption'**

Advertising

A loss of meaning and faith in our lives has led to a sense of alienation from our existence and environment. Advertising from the 1950s-60s sought to temporarily fill that void. "*The emptier a person's heart is, the more he or she needs things to buy, own, and consume*" LS-204

Planned Obsolescence

Items such as phones, computers, household machines, and cars are designed to break after a limited time. They're not durable, but lock the consumer into a constant need to upgrade (consume). This, in turn creates enormous (unnecessary) waste.

'Neoliberalism' and the need for economic growth

If you constantly need to demonstrate GDP growth that can be done (in the short/medium term) **IF** you don't care about the environmental cost. Ultimately, this kind of growth is 'unsustainable'.

All of these factors have led to a massive increase in consumption that increased 6 fold (600%) between 1960 and 2000. Does this trend continue?

Thinker's Background

- Born in Nenagh, Co. Tipperary, he was ordained as a 'missionary' priest of the Columban fathers in 1969.
- He spent 4 years in Mindanao in the Philippines where he worked closely with local communities and witnessed first-hand the devastating impact of changing farming practices and loss of biodiversity in local rainforests.
- He studied for his PhD in Linguistics and Anthropology in Washington DC. How might these skills have been useful to a 'missionary'?
- He returned to the Philippines and taught in Mindanao State University before going on to work with the T'boli mountain people
- Fr McDonagh has been openly critical of many church policies, particularly their ban on contraceptives and artificial birth control.
- In Pope Francis, Fr McDonagh found a solid ally. He was asked help with the shaping of *Laudato Si*, and much of the opening section is reflective of his input.
- He's still alive and spreading his missionary message.

Look up the meaning of words highlighted in **bold** above:
You'll need to pay particular attention to words like

Ecocide/Biocide:

Anthropocene :

Encyclical:

Personal Response

(A.) What aspects of other LC subjects might this be relevant? (Which specific aspects of Religion, Biology, and Human Geography are most relevant....?)

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

(B.) To what aspects of your daily life might the ideas of Fr McDonagh be relevant? Does the reducing power of the Catholic Church in Ireland make his ideas have less impact in Ireland, but a greater impact internationally?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Reading Tip: Unlike other Papal Encyclicals (the Pope's 'Policy Documents') that are addressed to Bishops and laity (believers), *Laudato Si* is specifically written to address all the people of the world. This makes it easy and accessible read. Some of the religious framing might seem off-putting, but otherwise it flows quite nicely.

Links to other aspects of the course

List different aspects of the course to which you think Fr McDonagh might be relevant. (can you list 3-4) This list will not be *definitive*, but can be added to over time...!

1. Are there ways that the shift in focus on what Catholics should do might impact Irish-Catholic identity in a noticeable way.
2. Given his experience in the Philippines, it should come as no surprise that Fr McDonagh shares Shiva's mistrust of companies like Monsanto and what he calls the "Chemicalization of the Planet". Their shared interest in the impact of big business makes them good partners in an essay on sustainable development.
3. He wants to return power to the people in the LDCs. He had 'no problem' being described as being sympathetic to Marxism. This would be quite unusual in a priest, and is certainly noteworthy!
4. How many of Fr McDonagh's ideas fit in closely with the subsequent "Sustainable Development Goals"?
5. To what degree is he a 'Feminist' when he notes that "*the most effective way of reducing population levels is to educate women.*"

Favourite Moment: At a talk that Fr McDonagh gave to the Pol-Soc teachers, he boiled the problem down by noting that "*You can bail out the banks, but you can't bail out the environment.*" This highlights the tension between neoliberalism and environmentalism perfectly!