

Seán McDonagh ssc

Irish Columban missionary priest
and Eco-theologian



MA, Ph.D (1944 -)

Sean McDonagh, a renowned ecological theologian, was born in Nenagh, Ireland, studied for the priesthood in St. Columban's College, Dalgan Park, Navan (ordained 1969), and was sent as a Columban missionary to Mindanao in the Philippines, the same year. After working among the lowland people in Oroqueita City, Misamis Occidental, Mindanao for four years, he studied linguistics and anthropology in USA.

On returning from Washington DC, he taught at the Mindanao State University in a predominantly Muslim area, and then moved to Lake Sebu to work among the mountain people called the T'boli. In response to the destruction of local forest in T'boli country, McDonagh began his ecological activism, which culminated in the pioneering book **To Care for the Earth** (1985), though it took three years to find a publisher because the connection between ecology and theology was not well known. **To Care for the Earth** called for a new theology which would give at least as much prominence to creation as to redemption. McDonagh argued that the grammar of this new creation theology ought to be the findings of modern science. This new cosmology developed from the insights of Teilhard deChardin and Thomas Berry ought to become the guiding myth for modern humankind, especially in the way we relate to the earth and other creatures.

In 1990 this volume was followed by **The Greening of the Church**, which revealed that, while Catholic teaching was strong on social issues, it needed to promulgate a supplementary message about the destruction of God's creation. The focus this time was on developing a theology of creation from the resources of the Biblical tradition to complement the cosmological approach.

His second book, moreover, contained the first environmental pastoral letter of any Catholic Conference of Bishops. It was entitled **What is happening to our beautiful Land?** and it had a major impact on the Philippine Church. Social justice programmes are no longer confined to addressing human rights abuses or working for a more equitable society. They now include concern for the environment. In the Philippines this means protecting what is left of the tropical forests, mangroves and coral reefs. The pastoral letter was also printed and distributed by the Philippine Department of the Environment and Natural Resources (DENR). McDonagh was the main drafter of this document, which was published in 1988.

Passion for the Earth (1995) contains a critique of multilateral lending and trading bodies (World Bank, IMF, GATT-WTO) and their effects on development and the environment. Third world debt was his particular focus.



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In 1999 **Greening the Christian Millennium** appeared. It reflects on the ethical and ecological implications of genetic engineering in the plant world and on the patenting of life. McDonagh argued that a human-centred ethical framework, that has dominated Western thought for almost 2,000 years, was unsuitable for discussing issues like genetic engineering. While supporting laboratory research in genetic engineering he maintained that current field trials and the commercial planting of genetically engineered crops breached the precautionary principle and posed a danger to human health and the environment. Furthermore he opposed patenting living organisms such as seeds or animals viewing this as a new form of colonialism whereby the North, which is financially rich but poor in biodiversity, is able to commandeer the rich species and genetic resources of the South.

Why are we Deaf to the Cry of the Earth was published in 2001 and looked at environmental challenges facing Ireland today after six years of unprecedented economic growth.

Dying for Water was published in 2003. It explores the crisis the world faces both in terms of access to fresh water and the destruction of the oceans. Unless this crisis is managed McDonagh predicts that the wars of the 21st century will be about water not oil.

Patenting Life? Stop! Is corporate greed forcing us to eat genetically engineered food? returns to the theme of genetic engineering and the patenting of living organisms. What is at stake here is the question of who will control the seeds of the staple crops of the world within the next decade and a half. McDonagh fears food will be controlled by a handful of Northern transnational corporations.

The Death of Life: The Horror of Extinction was published by Columba in the autumn of 2004. This book examines the current extinction spasm which is considered the 6th greatest extinction period since life began on the planet 3.8 billion years ago. McDonagh examines the biological, ethical and religious consequence of this destruction and discuss ways to turn back the tide before it is too late.

Climate Change : The Challenge to Us All (2006)

In his latest book, Sean describes how the threat of climate change comes about and shows the consequences of global warming. He then examines various responses to global warming and questions various solutions. Finally he examines how the churches have responded to this threat to date and calls for a wider ecological pastoral approach to ministry, respecting both social teaching and good science. Again, Sean writes with passion and a deep sense of urgency. As individuals and as institutions, we must make choices in favour of life. This is a prophetic call, calling for a radical change in the way we view ourselves in relation to the rest of creation.



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In November 2006, Fr. Sean McDonagh was awarded a Doctor of Philosophy by the Higher Education and Training Awards Council of Ireland (HETAC) on the basis of his published works. His examiners included Professor Sigurd Bergmann, Department of Archaeology and Religious Studies, Norwegian University of Technology, Trondheim, Sweden, Dr. Michael S Northcott, School of Divinity, The University of Edinburgh and Professor Celia Deane-Drummond, Department of Theology and Religious Studies, University of Chester.

In January and February 2009, Sean McDonagh gave four lectures at the National University of Ireland, Maynooth Campus on ethical aspects of Climate Change, the destruction of Biodiversity, the pollution of global water supply and genetically engineered food

On March 13th 2009 Sean McDonagh gave the keynote address to the Lobby on Congress Conference in Washington DC. The theme of the conference and subsequent lobby on Congress was Climate Change. More than 600 people from the major Christian denominations attended the Conference.

On April 9th 2009, Sean McDonagh gave a lecture on Ecological Theology at the University of Limerick.

During the Week of May 10th 2009 Sean McDonagh was one of two main speakers at a weeklong conference on Ecology and Faith at Assisi in Italy. The conference was attended by more than 260 participants, most of whom are in leadership roles in various religious orders and missionary congregations.

On September 23, 2009, Sean McDonagh gave a lecture on The Theology of Mining in the city of Cajamarca in Peru. He was awarded the Doctoral Degree Honoris Causa by the Universidad Nacional de Cajamarca. He also spoke on climate change at the University of Cesar Vallejo in Lima.

On November 2nd 2009 Sean McDonagh was one of the 260 religious leaders invited to Windsor Castle in Britain for a Celebration of Faiths and the Environment jointly organized by The Alliance of Religions and Conservations (ARC) and the United Nations Development Programme.

Sean McDonagh attended the UN Framework Conference on Climate Change in Copenhagen in December 2009, in Cancun in December 2010 and Durban in 2011 and Lima 2014. .

On May 1st 2010 Irish eco theologian, Fr Sean McDonagh, was awarded the Eighth Annual Partnership for Global Justice Award on Sunday May 1, 2011 at the Church of St Paul the Apostle in New York. Director of the Partnership for Global Justice, Sr Lucianne Siers, OP, said the organisation was honoured to be presenting the award to Fr McDonagh, "a man who has so elucidated our understanding of environmental justice and whose passion and dedication challenges us all to hear the cries of the poor and the cry of the Earth."

She added, "He represents the legacy and spirit of our annual Justice Award by his life-long work as a faithful steward."

The Partnership for Global Justice is a network of religious congregations, social justice groups and individuals that seeks to foster equitable global systems, strategies for ecological sustainability and a respect for the diversity of cultures and traditions through educational programmes, advocacy and participation with the UN as a non-governmental organisation.



**MERCY INTERNATIONAL
REFLECTION PROCESS**

Flaming the Fire of Mercy: Creation Waiting in Eager Longing

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In 2012 Fr. McDonagh published **Fukushima; The Death Knell for Nuclear Energy?** In this book Sean McDonagh looks at the response and reactions to the Fukushima disaster in March 2011.

In 2016, Orbis Books published, *On Care for Our Common Home: Laudato Si': The Encyclical Of Pope Francis on the Environment with Commentary By Sean McDonagh*

Garry W. Trompf

The University of Sydney

Sean McDonagh, **To Care for the Earth** (London: Chapman & Sons, 1985);

Sean McDonagh, **The Greening of the Church** (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1990);

Sean McDonagh, **Passion for the Earth** (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1995);

Sean McDonagh, **Greening the Christian Millennium** (Dublin: Dominican Publishers, 1999).

Sean McDonagh, **Why are we Deaf to the Cry of the Earth** (Dublin: Veritas. 2001).

Sean McDonagh, **Dying for Water** (Dublin: Veritas, 2003)

Sean McDonagh **Patenting Life? Stop! Is corporate greed forcing us to eat genetically engineered food?** (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 2003).

Sean McDonagh, **The Death of Life: The Horror of Extinction**, (Dublin: Columba, 2004).

Sean McDonagh, **Climate Change; the Challenge to Us All**, (Dublin, Columba 2006)

Sean McDonagh, **Fukushima; the Death Knell for Nuclear Energy?** (Dublin, Columba, 2012)

Articles by Seán McDonagh have appeared in **The Tablet, The Irish Times, America, The Hong Kong Examiner, The Furrow, Doctrine and Life, Spirituality, The National Catholic Reporter, The Universe** and numerous other publication in Europe, US, Asia and Australia.

Update version of Professor Gary Trompf's article in **Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature**, Vol. 2, Bron R. Taylor, (editor-in-Chief), 2005, Theemmes Continuum, London, pages 1070-1.

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