

A United Nations report this month laid bare the full extent of the damage humanity has wrought on the planet, and the dire threat this poses to all our lives. Yet while this week they recognised that we face an 'ecological crisis', our bishops are reluctant to take action / **By MARY COLWELL**

The empty sky

THERE IS A swift-shaped hole in my heart and it is so painful I want to weep. It is mid May and no screaming, twisting troupes of birds are scything the air over Bristol, bringing Africa into the heart of my temperate city. I watch for them every day; their absence is disorientating. I hope they are just late in arriving; maybe some turbulence in the air is stopping them crossing the ocean. Their numbers have fallen by more than 50 per cent since the 1990s and so I truly hope they do come. Anxiety grips my soul.

St Francis would have worried too; he also loved swifts. He said they reminded him of the poor; hunched figures beneath dark cloaks and hoods. They spoke to him of his calling to be simple and humble before God, but with a spirit that soars heavenwards. "You neither sow, nor reap," he proclaimed to the birds, "yet God provides for you the most delicious food, rivers, and lakes to quench your thirst, mountains, and valleys for your home, tall trees to build your nests."

Yes, God did do all that, for birds and for other creatures. Why then has the abundance of life on Earth fallen by more than half in the last 40 years? Why do far fewer birds sing, bees buzz, and wildflowers bloom than in the 1970s? Why has the tapestry of life become so threadbare?

It is because we have poisoned, polluted, flattened, dug up and filled in these creatures' homes. We have drained the wetlands and paved over the valleys, killed insects with toxins, trapped and poached magnificent beasts, shot migrating birds and ruthlessly removed ancient forests, forever destroying the silent and strong "ambassadors from another time", that so moved John Steinbeck. Humanity has burgeoned in numbers and our grip on the planet has increased. In response, this vibrant, singing planet has gone quiet and monochrome. We have done terrible things to Planet Earth.

WILDNESS, A PLACE of untrammelled unity with God, has been removed from the air, the earth and under the sea. We have smothered our blue planet in rubbish, much of it meaningless frippery. There are even Coca-Cola cans in the deepest trenches in the ocean. Whales and dolphins wash up on shore with their stomachs filled with plastic shopping bags. Every single one of us should bow our head in shame. We may not have literally taken the chainsaw in our hands, but this disaster has unfolded on our watch.



An illustration of swifts in flight by Paul Thomas, author of *A Tabloid History of Birdwatching* (price £12.99 plus p&p, available from paulthomascartoons.co.uk)

eroding the very foundations of our economies, livelihoods, food security, health and quality of life worldwide."

The loss of wild creatures and wild lands matters. Our survival and the future of our children is at stake – no less than that. If ecosystems and wild creatures can't clean water, restore soils, take carbon from the air, pollinate plants and stabilise sediments, then every single one of us will perish, no matter how much money we have or how robust our man-made institutions.

Some of us have been pleading for the Church to face this catastrophe and to speak out, but our voices fall on closed ears and minds. The bishops have declared that humanity faces a crisis, and there is action on climate change, but loss of biodiversity doesn't register. At present the environmental work of the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales is handled by Cafod, which is an expert in climate change mitigation, but has no remit for and no specialist expertise in conservation.

I wonder why – when there is such a clear mandate to act from Pope Francis – the bishops refuse to take this issue seriously. *Laudato Si'*, the environmental encyclical published in 2015, is a love poem to the world. It is a beautiful, heartfelt and far-reaching plea for action. It speaks straight to our souls and it is rooted in St Francis. Not only is it a beautiful, lyrical piece of writing, it demands a rethink of Catholicism's attitude to the Earth and the creatures who live alongside us.

"IT IS NOT ENOUGH to think of different species merely as potential 'resources' to be exploited, while overlooking the fact that they have value in themselves," writes Pope Francis.

The cry of the Earth was bought to the fore by the United Nations biodiversity report published on 6 May. It laid bare the extent of the damage humanity has wrought. It presented nearly 15,000 separate studies and government reports that integrated findings from science, indigenous peoples, agricultural communities and the humanities. It firmly and resolutely places the loss of wildlife as equal to climate change as one of the biggest threats we face.

"WE HAVE NEVER had a single, unified statement from the world's governments that unambiguously makes clear the crisis we are facing for life on Earth," said Thomas Brooks, chief scientist at the International Union for Conservation of Nature. And if you are still in any doubt that this matters for us, that it isn't just an unfortunate by-product of otherwise helpful progress, then Robert Watson, atmospheric scientist and chair of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services, which produced the report, puts it plainly: "We are

"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 for ever. 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." These are radical and visionary words.

But it doesn't stop there. "Caring for ecosystems demands far-sightedness, since no one looking for quick and easy profit is truly interested in their preservation ... Where certain species are destroyed or seriously harmed, the values involved are incalculable. We can be silent witnesses to terrible injustices if we think that we can obtain significant benefits by making the rest of humanity, present and future, pay the extremely high costs of environmental deterioration." We are "silent witnesses to terrible injustices".

Pope Francis goes on to say what we should do: "Each area is responsible for the care of this family [wildlife]. This will require undertaking a careful inventory of the species which it hosts, with a view to developing programmes and strategies of protection with particular care for safeguarding species heading towards extinction."

When I first read those words, I wanted to fall to my knees in gratitude. So let me throw out a challenge to the Church in the UK. How

many parishes have reached out to the wildlife organisations that exist in their area and asked them to do an environmental audit on church grounds? How many churches have bat and bird boxes, insect "hotels", pollinator-friendly plants? Has advice been sought on how to nurture life around church properties? Is your parish a beacon of right-relationship with nature, a place that attracts wildlife so that all around have a glimpse of what it looks like to love the Earth? How many sermons are on plastic pollution, over-fishing, choosing a lifestyle that reflects a holy approach to what goes into our shopping trolleys?

I WOULD HAZARD a guess that the answer is not many. And yet these are simple actions that only require local involvement. They reach out to the community and embrace the challenge of today. They don't demand we all save the planet on our own, just the bit of it in which we live. In the light of the UN report and in the spirit of *Laudato Si'*, is this too much to ask? An inventory may reveal what can be done for locally declining species. The Church need only ask humbly and sincerely for help. With such huge environmental destruction on a global scale, putting our own house in order is the right thing to do. Small, simple, holy steps give a big message.

For too long the Church has been tardy in protecting nature. Perhaps it is fearful of a re-emergence of ancient ties to paganism,

that murky, undefined, existential threat to our souls. Cardinal Pell, currently in prison in Australia, certainly thought it was. He declared that a "pagan emptiness" was behind "hysterical claims" about the state of the Earth, and his statements went uncorrected.

Another factor may be that truly accepting – at an organic, visceral level – that humanity is integrated into the very stuff of this planet is too challenging. Deeply held notions of dominance and hierarchy are still prevalent. These may have been discredited by the findings of science, but they still exert a grip on the Christian imagination, draining it of our connection to nature and stifling compassion for its suffering.

The UN biodiversity report is devastating in its assessment of what we have done and where we are heading. I am rarely truly angry, but I am now. I plead with the bishops to read this report and to discern what the Church can do – and to do it quickly. *Laudato Si'* ends with a plea that cannot be ignored: "Teach us to discover the worth of each thing, to be filled with awe and contemplation, to recognise we are profoundly united with every creature as we journey towards your ultimate light." If we do this with a sincere heart, we will be on the road to putting things right.

Mary Colwell is a writer and producer. Her latest book, *Curlew Moon*, is published by William Collins, price £9.99 (Tablet price, £9).

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