

WITNESS STATEMENT OF CORA TWOHIG-MOENGANGONGO

My name is Cora Twohig-Moengangongo. I was born into a Catholic family in Ireland. My family immigrated to Canada when I was six years old. We became a family of six siblings with my parents. I was raised in Toronto in the fifties and sixties and educated in a Catholic school system including in an all-girl high school taught by nuns, the Congregation of Notre Dame. After high school graduation I studied in a secular post-secondary institute and entered the teaching profession. This period marked my meeting people from a wider world of beliefs and practices from my own consistent and somewhat parochial religious upbringing. I taught for six years consecutively in Catholic schools, continued studies and began my travels, at first in summers and then to longer living and working commitments. I returned to Ireland, toured Europe and the Middle East, volunteered with CUSO (Canadian University Service Overseas) in the Kingdom of Tonga in the South Pacific and, after Tonga, co-ordinated and taught in an educational project, Brandon University Northern Teacher Education Project (BUNTEP) in the First Nations Community at Cross Lake, Manitoba. A decade ago I taught in a Theologate in eastern Nigeria. Through these experiences I became increasingly sensitive to the values of human dignity expressed in social equity, health and education and what made for the flourishing or not of communities. Cities with all they bring in lights, transportation, fast pace, sounds, technologies and endless distractions, often were in the background of my experience of small communities where streams, trees, birds and space brought respite. Catholic Christian prayer and worship continued to guide and sustain my living in each new place.

My faith as a Catholic Christian was tested in the late sixties and early seventies. The questioning and searching for meaningful living intensified. Women's identity and the concerns of international inequities, poverty and war took priority in my life focus. Many answers from my earlier faith knowledge and experience seemed inadequate. I continued to pray, to celebrate with Eucharist in churches, in small chapels, and at multiple sacred shrines in Ireland and in Europe (more a pilgrim than a tourist) and to visit and pray at my father's grave in remembrance and thanksgiving. Yet I experienced the conflict that I

now understand as an invitation to a more mature faith and more committed living in the beliefs, practices and values I hold. Hiking on the Bruce Trail became a meditative time where I recalled Aboriginal teachings of sacred rocks and circles, and where I remembered stories of Jesus going to a lonely place outside, up a hill, a place away, to pray.

The invitation from CUSO in Ottawa in 1972 to be one of two Canadians to initiate a CUSO program in Tonga in the South Pacific intrigued me. In due course I resigned my teaching post from Centennial College in Toronto and on an icy January day in 1973 I travelled to Polynesia. Here in the slow-moving, tropical nation of many islands, I received the beauty of a people, their harmonious living, respectfully, within themselves, with their extended families and communities, with their environment of sea, fertile land, abundant fruits and vegetables and somehow with a clear absence of all but a small yet adequate commercial presence, and, very visibly with their God and God's presence in worship, music, dance and artistry. How negatively these images contrasted with what I had read of a United Nations report that in 1973 listed Tonga among the twenty-five poorest nations in the world. The norm or measure would presumably be the GNP Gross National Product. How was their richness beyond pa'anga (money) calculated? Why was their contentment (and my own growing peace and joy in living there), their dignified and harmonious living, the centrality of their Christian prayer and public worship, their endless and generous hospitality to me a stranger, why was this confronting me with an uneasy challenge to the "good life" I lived in Canada, that was rich, developed, modern and afforded me good work, material security and a substantial salary to buy many things? Perhaps my values from my culture and my Christian living were measuring up "among the world's poorest?"

These several years living and teaching in Tonga were the beginning of my deeper faith journey that in Christian terms is called conversion. This life-long process is a turning away from certain values, attitudes and behaviours towards a more intentional, true and self-ordered life, guided by my religious beliefs and practices, supported by a community of believers, in prayer and service to others, in simplicity of living, in valuing other

persons however the same however different, in the gift and shared reality of all resources while respecting individual freedom, choices and responsible ownership. In this early conversion time especially, I was experiencing my relation with my natural surroundings intensely, in awe in scenes of ocean, sunrise, sunset unimpeded with walls; in fear during destructive tropical storms especially out on the sea, and in a multitude of sights, sounds of work, laughter, silence, smells of plants and flowers, tastes that revitalized my body and energized my spirit to feel deeply thankful and at peace and to wonder what this new aliveness would mean. I heard the creation stories in the Book of Genesis, the first book of the Bible as if for the first time. I have written about this as “Creating a Life” in *Vox Feminarum*, (Vol.1, Issue 1, 1996)

One effect of this conversion was to a more committed spiritual practice of prayer, meditation, involvement with my faith community and a desire to learn more about the source of this new and profound experience that enlivened and energized me, an experience of goodness in myself and in others, in the world. Soon too, old questions about justice, poverty and evil in the world resurfaced with increased urgency. Back in Canada I began studies in Sacred Scripture, with the intention of taking one or two courses at Regis College, the Jesuit School in the Toronto School of Theology at the University of Toronto. Twelve years later I completed a Doctorate in Theology. In these years my questioning was always respectfully encouraged by my Jesuit mentors. I needed to explore how my faith, beliefs, values, practice, traditions, teachings, rituals, in short, how everything changes when one’s centre of value shifts from my own satisfaction to the value of knowing an Ultimate Reality that is far beyond a finite human measure of existence.

In this context I asked how ecological destruction, environmental degradation and willful disrespect of nature’s renewing cycles and limits were theologically and religiously sinful. At Regis College and ever since I have experienced a genuine welcome to share the Jesuit life of space, study, prayer and friendship. I shared worship in chapel and around a campfire circle at sunrise in High Park on Easter Morning. I saw benevolence in believing the best of everyone and encouraging the best in me. The name Jesuit, is

follower of Jesus. The way of service and care, in the name of Jesus for the glory of God, is the Jesuit way. I learned it is the authentic Christian way. I am deeply committed to following the way of Jesus who shows me how to live a loving, forgiving life of service. Jesus is God become human. This God is Love, is forgiveness and is intimately caring of all that God has created. God, visible in Jesus, then becomes the measure of human living. Of course my achievement is most often short of my commitment but each new day is another gift and invitation to be faithful to the way I have been given. So I sit at my computer, like others. I try to express how the Sacred, and spaces like the Jesuit Centre and graveyards are indispensable to bring me back to that centre within myself that is sacred, where I am most honest, real and willing to do what it takes to create order, truth, goodness, peace and justice for now and for generations to come, as our Creator desires us to be and do.

Loyola House Retreats

During these years of theology studies I first learned about the Jesuit Centre at Guelph. I participated in day-long prayer events and looked forward to being in that sacred space away from downtown Toronto where the silence, the land, the flow of the seasons, the slowing down all around me and within me offered a healing of my tired body, my anxious psyche and my doubting spirit. Here at Loyola House in 1986 I was accepted to make the long Ignatian silent retreat of thirty days, followed by a ten day Institute of integration and reflection on that experience. The retreat follows the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits in the 16th century. Over these thirty days in silence I came to explore all the lands of the Jesuit centre, the trees, birds and flowers, the farm fields, the workers, the barn and animals, the wetlands, the pond, the graveyards, the community vegetable gardens, the orchards, the swimming pool, the retreat house with the chapel and the dining room where we ate unhurriedly and in silence. This is truly a human scale and pace of life where I could renew my life in attentiveness to this moment. Since 1986 I cannot count the numbers of retreats, usually eight days long, as well as days of prayer, parish days, workshop days, where I have been renewed by the “holy ground” of the Jesuit Centre.

Here with the guidance of spiritual directors and private and community prayer with other retreatants and staff, I can remember how times of silent contemplation in the sacred space of Loyola House and the Jesuit lands, and time of active engagement in a noisy, bustling city meeting the demands of everyday life--contemplation and action are intimately related and need one another. Following graduation from Regis College in Toronto, I was asked to teach in a school of theology in Eastern Nigeria. During several years there I witnessed how in the midst of political, economic and social upheaval, a spiritual and religious centre of faith sustained the people and sustained me especially in Sunday worship, long and jubilant in spite of the currents of violence and turbulence. Now I teach courses at St Michael's Faculty of Theology at the University of Toronto. I am an active parishioner at Our Lady of Lourdes in downtown Toronto, a multi-ethnic, multi-racial Catholic community with its vibrant liturgical life and its wide-ranging justice and social outreach. My faith and prayer life are my lifeline, sustained by daily prayer rituals and among people of this communities of believers who "walk the walk!"

Sacred Lands and Religious Tradition

Theologically, sacred lands, holy mountains, baptismal streams, grottos, sacred caves and bushes all invite us into the presence of the Holy One. I feel and know that I am in communion with all those down the ages and today in every part of the world who have been touched by the Mystery of the Holy One. I am forgetful! When I feel dismissed, pushed, cut off, made to go faster, do more, be more, eat more, drink more, anaesthetize myself more, possess more, I forget myself and my choice to live in freedom, in wholeness, in God. I become driven and caught in the swamp of disregard, disrespect, neediness, egoism, excess and all that is life-denying. I come to sacred space to remember that I am beloved of the Holy One, as is everyone and all creation. In eight days at the Jesuit Centre (or one or three), walking softly and prayerfully on the earth and around the graveyards, in the silence, slowly, without destination, I breathe deeply, deeply to exhale the pollution, the noise, the disturbance of daily living and I remember my heartbeat as it beats in the Heart of God. I cry or laugh or sing or even dance (the birds off in the fields don't mind) with the forgiveness, the freedom, the hope, the love I am given so abundantly. Thumping radios or loudspeakers would crash into this silence

and block that sacred journey inward. Paper, cans, flyers, fast food remains, scavengers will distract from my becoming absorbed in the artistry of a pine cone or a red-berried bush on a snow white path. When I walk out at night to gaze at the stars and the moon in awe of God's greatness and my being invited to share this beauty I will be denied this freedom of worship when light pollution from massive commercial development conceals the skies. The concealing light?!

Environment and Religious Retreat

The environment is critical for a time of religious retreat. Catholic Christianity is sacramental. This means that water, oil, salt, incense, wheat, wine, all these gifts of nature are brought into religious ritual and worship to remind us we are earthly people, connected to heaven, by love from the Lover of all creation and love from one another. Silence, space, nature's own order of seasons, air, water, all kept as clean and unpolluted as the watchful monitoring of the ecologically conscious and committed Jesuit and lay staff can achieve in their responsible stewardship help sustain this sacred environment. Loyola House itself provides a supportive, secure, restful, welcoming place where I can come away, not only from Toronto but many come from around the world, and pray, remember and say thank you.

I have meditated in summer in a far field with only an occasional bird or fly to accompany me.

I waited patiently over many days in the barn to attend the birthing by the cow to her calf. I pondered the slow, often painful process of bringing something new to birth and I prayed in thanksgiving for my life, for those who brought me to life, for all those I love and for the lives of all with whom I celebrated Eucharist daily on this retreat.

I have prayed while swimming noiselessly at night in the pool and have been grateful to watch handicapped children splash delightedly earlier in the day as they visited from L'Arche to remind me that all people are worthy of care and respect.

I have watched intense cooperative harvesting of hay by the farm community in late summer and valued our shared endeavours as groups as communities, as societies, as persons of faith.

The community gardeners from Guelph, who lovingly plant, weed, share tips with fellow gardeners and produce bountifully offer many images that in contemplation and ritual teach me of this world, this universe and my place with other creatures in it and of the ecstatic generosity of the Creator.

While on retreat in January 2006, the Catholic Church celebrated the feast of the Epiphany, the revelation of the newborn Jesus to the wider world, symbolized by the Three Wise Kings from a far distance. My guidance for that day was to make a pilgrimage around many sites on the Jesuit grounds and graveyards to recall how in the last twenty years each place touched me, in my grieving, my conflict, my fear, my beginnings and my endings of life projects, my hopes and dreams, my being healed and my reaffirming my life and religious commitments. It became my Epiphany of Remembrance. It was in this sacred space away from "...the hurly burly" that this evolving and sustained meditation and contemplation could be given to me. The Jesuit lands and the graveyards north of Guelph are as perfect as any place on this impermanent planet can be for religious prayer and worship. Spiritual development is a slow movement, just like cooking a good meal is slow cooking for best results! One word that floods into every conversation today is 'stress' and 'how stressed out we are', this coming even from twelve and thirteen year old young people. Is shopping, buying and surrounding them and ourselves with more stuff the way we teach them the art of living? The integrity of these lands as sacred space, and their evolving commitments to nature and human flourishing by grace, must not be compromised by large scale commercial development on the proposed Walmart end of the property. The 6&7 Mitigation Agreement of December 6, 2001, will not satisfactorily respect the reality and need for this sacred space JUST AS IT IS.

Theological Reflection on Values

The role of theology is to mediate a religion with its meanings and values to a culture. I have attempted to express through my faith story, how integral sacred space is my religious journey and practice and to call me back often to the Sacred all around me and within me. It is a conscious act of remembering; it is praying; it is holy. Such activity is whole-making of me and of others who participate in authentic religious practice. We in

turn live within societies, around Guelph and beyond. As authentic religious individuals, we gather in religious communities, churches, mosques, temples to pray, to celebrate, to welcome, to mourn, to learn, to organize religious and social projects. We contribute to the development and wholeness in society. Sacred spaces build up society by the lives of individuals who have been blessed in sacred spaces. The presence of the sacred space of the Jesuit Centre is an oasis and a symbol of good and harmonious activity. Commercial development can benefit a society when it is designed and planned to fulfill its balanced purposes while respecting and firmly supporting the value of sacred space. People who work and shop at Walmart are also people who long for and live authentic lives in their whole body/psyche/spiritual beings. The value of the sacred or the secular must not and need not be compromised. These days as I reflect and write I hear the news of the Ipperwash Inquiry into the death of Dudley George. He along with others was protesting the disregard by some people of their Aboriginal sacred space. Can we afford to disregard the violation of religious values in a culture that has fallen into a deep sleep of forgetfulness in our self-indulgence?

Religious Values and a Fuller Picture

Religious values are not separate from all that makes up our living. I want to bring the writing of Bernard Lonergan*, a contemporary Jesuit theologian, into these deliberations with an extensive quote that I hope will affirm the abiding significance of the Jesuit Centre and the cemeteries as sacred spaces just as they are. He is writing about the self-transcending reach of human beings and the importance of our feelings for integrity of living. Religious values touch our core.

Not only do feelings respond to values. They do so in accord with some scale of preference. So we may distinguish vital, social, cultural, personal and religious values in an ascending order. Vital values, such as health and strength, grace and vigour, normally are preferred to avoiding the work, privations, pains involved in acquiring, maintaining, restoring them. Social values, such as the good of order which conditions the vital values of the whole community, have to be preferred to the vital values of individual members of the community. Cultural values do not exist without the underpinning of vital and social values, but none the less they rank higher. Not on bread alone doth man live. Over and above mere living and operating, humans have to find a meaning and value in their living and operating. It is the function of culture to discover, express,

validate, criticize, correct, develop, improve such meaning and value. Personal value is the person in their self-transcendence. As loving and being loved, as originator of values in themselves and their milieu, as an inspiration and invitation to others to do likewise. Religious values, finally, are at the heart of the meaning and value of our living and our world. (Italics mine)

This initiative to protect and promote sacred spaces, in particular, the Jesuit Centre and the cemeteries in Guelph, is a response to what I experience and judge to be the core of my life. Through its Charter of Rights and Freedoms the people of Canada are assured of the wisdom of those who formed and those who protect my and our freedom to practice our religion toward truth, goodness and peace.

*Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology*,
(London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1972), 31-

32.