



# We Cannot be Silent!

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# Foreword

I have always loved the story of the Visitation. After the drama of the Annunciation when the teenage Mary assents to becoming the mother of God, though not without expressing her concerns to the angel-messenger, she was undoubtedly as excited as she was terrified. She really needed someone to talk to, someone who could be trusted to listen and to reassure. So she turned to Elizabeth and both women helped each other to contemplate and reimagine a world in which God was about to intervene more emphatically than in all of human history. The birth of the great interruptor, Jesus, was only months away and the world would never be the same. No treaty negotiations between big powers could ever hope to match the encounter between Mary and Elizabeth. This booklet sets out to capture anew the lessons to be learnt from that epic reunion of these two humble, untitled women, Mary and Elizabeth, whose voices still speak insistently from a place where women were silent and silenced. *We Cannot be Silent* outlines how the Visitation can act as a catalyst for all of us who dream that another world, where all voices are heard, is possible – a world capable of becoming a fair and decent homeland for all God’s family, all those who are the work of his hands. But we are intended to be the hands of the work that will bring about a world fuelled by love, compassion, and the communal heft needed to make justice and equality real.



Our world is in a fragile state and far from that ideal. So many are poor, overlooked, neglected, excluded, downtrodden, lacking in opportunity and overshadowed by disease. So many lives are half-lived, so many talents wasted. That has to change. People of good will are needed to lift their voices and proclaim that things must be different. We cannot be silent. When the world leaders journeyed to the United Nations to endorse the Sustainable Development Goals, they came, like Mary to Elizabeth, to listen openly to one another and to galvanise the ambitious plan that would recast the world as a place of realistic and realizable hope for the “oneness” of the human family.

The 17 Sustainable Development Goals which they devised interrupted a complacent world, injected energy and urgency into our care for one another and especially for those left behind. We are at a great moment of profound global transformation if only we make it happen together. This booklet invites us to grapple with the realization that we cannot go on with a ‘business as usual’ approach. Planetary boundaries will not permit it. Women and girls across the globe will not permit it. Hungry people will not permit it. Dispossessed persons will not permit it. So how do we harness and use our human greatness, how do we free up God’s gift to us of a grace capable of heroic efforts or miraculous outcomes? We join the journey towards each other, find in our sisterhood and brotherhood the reassurance that we need not fear the scale of the mission God has entrusted to us.

The Talmud tells us:

“Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world’s grief.

Do justly, now.

Love mercy, now.

You are not obliged to complete the work,  
but neither are you free to abandon it.”

Now let us push out into the deep and reach that farther shore....

Mary Mc Aleese  
President of Ireland – 1997-2011  
Chancellor – Trinity College, Dublin



# Introduction

If life is about anything, it is about relationships. Often, relationships are formed and take part within the context of a journey. One such journey which has often inspired me is the journey taken by the sixteen-year-old pregnant Mary to visit her cousin Elizabeth, as recorded in the Christian scriptures. The Visitation story, I believe, can help the contemporary reader gain insights into what motivated world leaders from across the globe to journey and gather at the United Nations to develop the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).<sup>1</sup>

Set in the context of these two pending births – the Visitation journey and the birthing of a new world vision – this publication entitled *We Cannot be Silent!* invites the reader to contemplate the mystery of birth and the call to help deliver a new world order based on compassionate, empathetic togetherness, wherein all children, irrespective of race, gender or geographical homeland, can live in a world which cherishes the dignity of difference and respects the equality of all.

Saint Luke tells us that Mary and Elizabeth meet in the house of Zechariah, who, the scripture story says, has been struck silent [Luke: 1. 63-64]. What is unusual in this very patriarchal first-century Palestine society is that the voices of men are absent. No men are around. Women are the actors who hold centre stage; women are the speakers who powerfully embody the mercy of God. And they do so in the context of meeting and affirming one another. A pregnant girl is not the usual image that comes to mind when one thinks of a prophet, yet here we have not one but two spirit-filled pregnant prophets singing out with joy and proclaiming a new world order!

Theologian Susan Ross envisions yet another way in which this text is prophetic:

“It portrays women looking at each other for validation for their authority, rather than to men.

This experience of female solidarity is unequalled in its ability to support women’s struggles for equal justice and care, for themselves and for others.”<sup>2</sup>

Mary continues to be a sister to all marginalized people who live unchronicled lives in oppressive situations. It does her no honour to disconnect her from her conflicted and dangerous historical circumstances, and transmute her into an icon of peaceful, middle-class life, dressed in royal blue.<sup>3</sup>



The Visitation story offers us a lens through which contemporary movements such as the impact on of Covid-19 and the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals might be viewed. The encounter of Mary and Elizabeth bears witness to the urgency of the women (and men) across the globe who bring compassion and justice as they go in haste towards the cries of the earth and the poor.

Our first-century sisters exemplify clearly what we are being called to in this twenty-first century as we listen, hear and then embrace a *global heartbeat*, in which no one is excluded.



This small booklet is an invitation to come to terms with how we might respond in a world turned upside down in a pandemic and at the dawn of the great unknown.

Using the Visitation story as our starting point, we will examine in five sections how we might more fully integrate the Sustainable Development Goals into our lives, and how we might encourage membership to

embrace and live out the radical call to solidarity with each other, as exemplified by Mary's revolutionary song – The Magnificat. Whilst combining to form a unified whole, each section can also be considered individually for stand-alone reflection.

- The Universality of the Call
- From “Band Aid” to Advocacy
- Mutuality and Interdependence
- Oneness
- Global Awareness and Solidarity

# 1: The Universality of the Call



It is over five years since world leaders journeyed to the United Nations in New York City to enmesh a new dream for all by signing the Sustainable Development Goals. The 17 Sustainable Development Goals recognized that we were/are at a great moment of transformation.

At their core is the recognition that the world needs ways of sensing emerging disruptions that encourage cooperation, rather than division.

The challenge offered by the new set of goals was more than just a new set of data and information. The data is in and the data is clear: we are part of the web of life and engaging in what is happening, anywhere in the world, means that human pain, wherever it occurs, and the distress of the planet must concern us all.



Many groups from all faiths, including Religious Congregations, have invested resources in having a representative at the United Nations and so one is prompted to ask:

**How have the Sustainable Development Goals and their implementation impacted on us, five years later, as we go about the business of our lives?**

How, for example, have Religious Congregations integrated/interpreted the Sustainable Development Goals into the way they write and live Mission or Chapter statements and ultimately lifestyles?

**How have churches, synagogues and mosques used the Goals for instruction to help the peoples in the pews live lives which are about the common good?**

Whilst many governments have gone to great lengths to diminish the role of faith and religion in public affairs, the UN has developed a very constructive interface with faith leaders. Former Secretary-Generals Kofi Annan and Ban Ki-moon were always very open to the presence of religious women and men at the United Nations and often spoke publicly, highlighting the important role of faith-based groups.

The United Nations Children's branch was out front in answering that call. Anthony Lake, a former Executive Director of UNICEF, wrote: "Long before there was a UNICEF, faith communities were among the greatest advocates for the world's neediest children, providing guidance, aid and comfort to millions of disadvantaged families. Today, faith communities continue to be an indispensable partner in UNICEF's work to advance children's rights and enhance their well-being."<sup>4</sup>

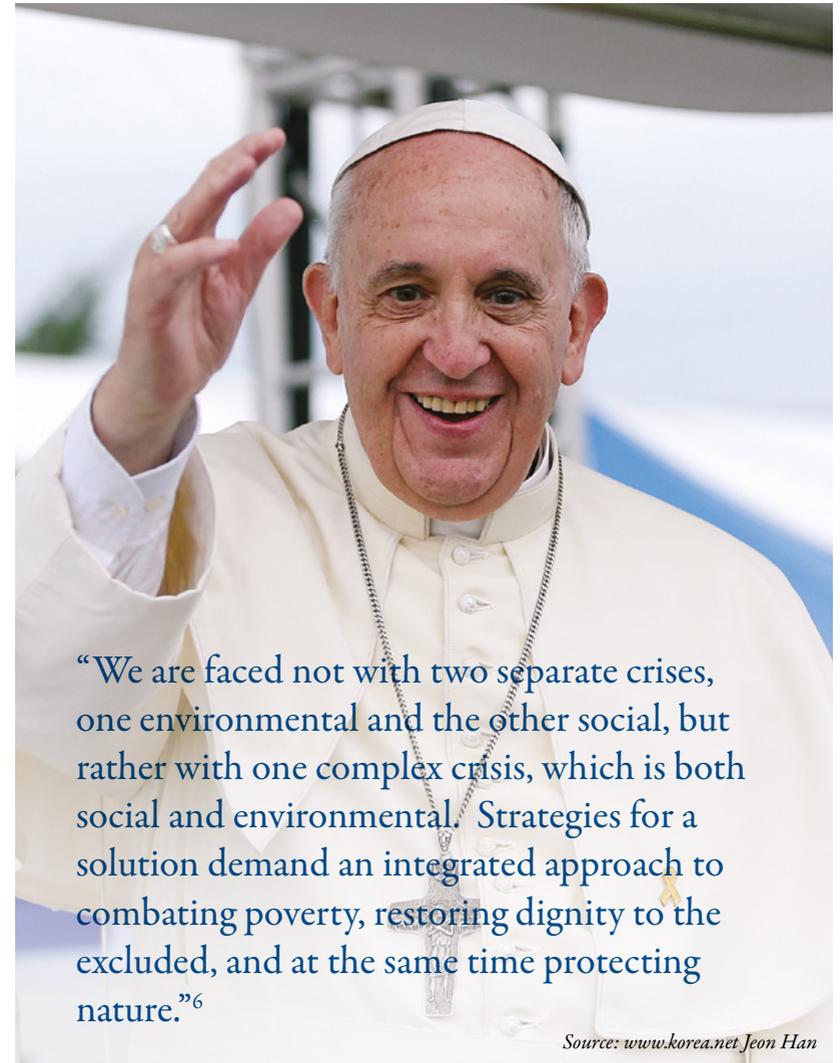


As the current world drama and global pandemic continues to unfold, it has become evident that state actors alone cannot successfully address the problems. Indeed, in contemporary times, non-governmental actors have become not only relevant, but legitimate actors in the larger policy process. Speaking to this point, Ambassador Joy Ogwu, a former permanent Nigerian representative to the United Nations, said:

“Groups from institutions of religious life have been the most influential NGOs. They have not only played a range of positive roles but have also affected UN decision making and its approach to global issues by the moral and ethical consciousness they bring to the entire process of peace, security and development. **Because of their long history of activities in education and care for poor people, they have been the pioneers in technologies, literacy, and medical knowledge in many parts of the world.**”<sup>5</sup>



Just a week before world leaders from across the globe arrived in New York to launch the Sustainable Development Goals, Pope Francis released the encyclical *Laudato Si'* on the connection between dignity, development and human ecology. In this document, he invited all to enter into dialogue on our common home and the environmental crises we face. He asked us to re-examine our relationships with each other, the planet and the economy.



“We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis, which is both social and environmental. Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature.”<sup>6</sup>

Source: [www.korea.net](http://www.korea.net) Jeon Han

The shifting emphasis from Millennium Development Goals to Sustainable Development Goals galvanized unprecedented efforts to address global development challenges in a more holistic way. As UN Ambassadors David Donoghue (Ireland) and Macharia Kamau (Kenya), who co-facilitated meetings, said:

*“Civil Society and major groups have been with us. We are concerned, however, about the level of awareness about the Sustainable Development Goals and civil society has a role to play in raising awareness.”<sup>7</sup>*

**Dignity** is at the heart of the new global goals. They are universal and equally applicable to all countries; and they can be used to advocate for more equitable development, based on tackling the systemic and root causes of poverty and unsustainable development.



That same dignity and respect for difference is at the heart of the Visitation encounter when Mary and Elizabeth greet and meet. The two women dream new dreams for themselves, for each other, for the world and the universe. The very presence of the pregnant and unmarried teenage Mary in the home of Elizabeth at this point in Elizabeth's life experience speaks about the primacy and dignity of the human person. There is no harsh judgment present.

However, as we read the Magnificat or poem found on the lips of Mary, we are invited to look at her with new eyes. She is not the meek, subservient one so often portrayed. A careful pondering of the words of the Magnificat, and not the poetry of the words, points to the five important verbs therein. We are told: God *respects* the poor; *exalts* the poor; *feeds* the poor; *helps* the poor; *remembers* the poor. And so we ask: Who is this young woman proclaiming such a revolutionary message? God has chosen a servant girl from a poor country to deliver a revolutionary message. Mary sang her revolutionary song to her cousin, Elizabeth. Its message is a prelude to the gospel and a call to turn unjust systems upside down by respecting the poor, feeding the poor, exalting the poor, both within our hearts and by our actions. It is not enough to be compassionate.

**We must ACT.**



The implications of the Magnificat's message have never truly been explored. For example, its revolutionary message has resulted in its public recitation being banned by the governments of Guatemala, India and Argentina. The German-Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, killed by the Nazis in 1954, wrote: "The song of Mary is at once the most passionate, the wildest, one might even say the most revolutionary hymn ever written. This is not the gentle, tender, dreamy Mary whom we sometimes see in paintings. This is the passionate, proud, enthusiastic Mary who speaks out here... this song is a hard, strong song about collapsing thrones and humbling of the Lords of this world, about the power of God and the powerlessness of humankind."<sup>8</sup> This song is a call to action!

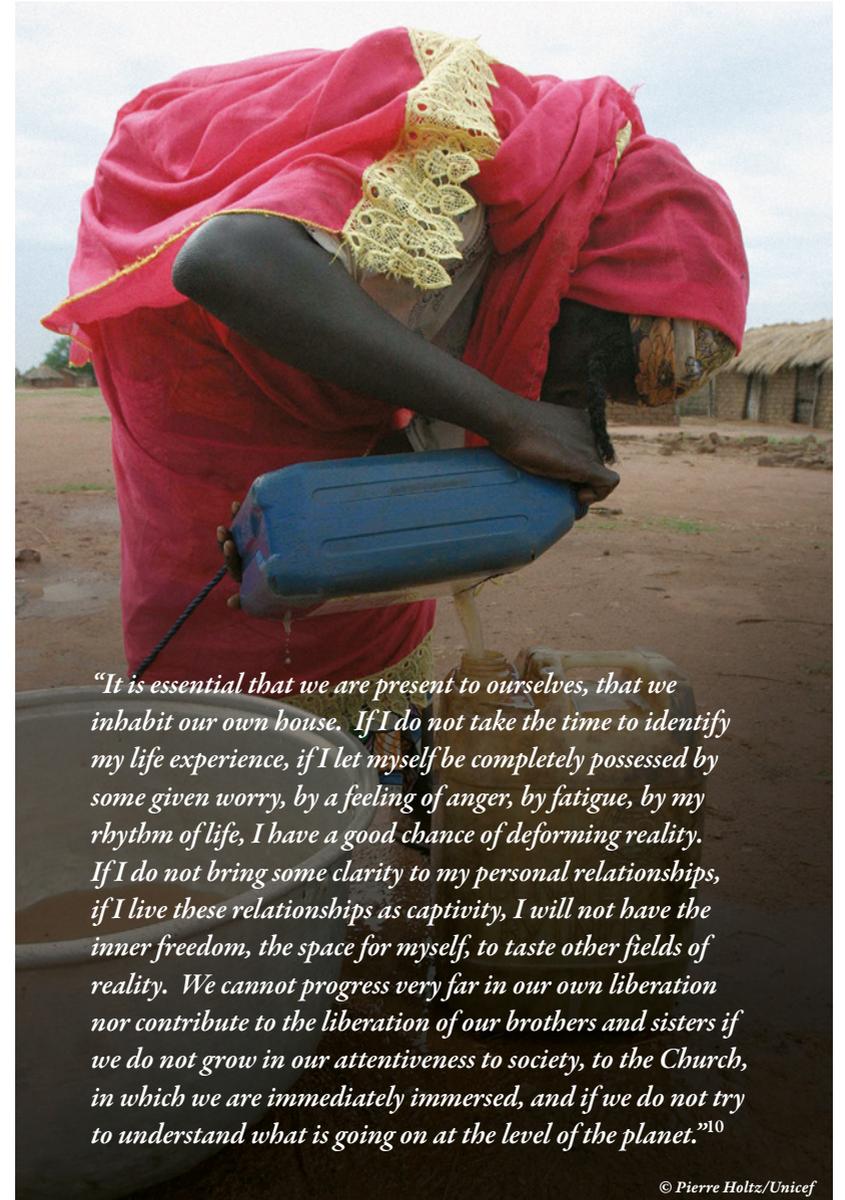


Any Visitation encounter invites each person to be open to the hidden riches in the other and requires participants to confront personal prejudices and thoughts that the seemingly weak individual has nothing to offer. Speaking to this point, Marie Chin, RSM said:

*"The Journey takes us beyond compassion, through and beyond the rigors of intellectual analysis and understanding of what causes anguish, confusion and despair, to discovering the disturbing fact that those who we thought were in need of our assistance can and will save themselves with or without us. Those whom we thought we were liberating are in fact our liberators. We cannot be liberated without them!"*

The meeting of Mary with Elizabeth described in the Gospel of Luke is an example of such a liberation moment. Lorraine Caza, CND sees the

meeting as a mutual moment of recognition of the power of God in the miraculous life growing in each woman. In order for us to be free and to respond to need, as Mary did in the story of the Visitation, Caza says:



*"It is essential that we are present to ourselves, that we inhabit our own house. If I do not take the time to identify my life experience, if I let myself be completely possessed by some given worry, by a feeling of anger, by fatigue, by my rhythm of life, I have a good chance of deforming reality. If I do not bring some clarity to my personal relationships, if I live these relationships as captivity, I will not have the inner freedom, the space for myself, to taste other fields of reality. We cannot progress very far in our own liberation nor contribute to the liberation of our brothers and sisters if we do not grow in our attentiveness to society, to the Church, in which we are immediately immersed, and if we do not try to understand what is going on at the level of the planet."<sup>10</sup>*

© Pierre Holtz/Unicef

In each and every one of our human encounters, we are invited to learn about the uniqueness of each person, to treat this person as a gift to humanity. Whenever we find that the “other” is in a situation of oppression or exclusion because they are part of a certain racial group, gender, religion, or because they are of a certain age, or because they find themselves in a particular physical, psychological or economic situation, what is our response?

“The Visitation encounter is the image, the parable for all human life.”<sup>11</sup> Similarly, the dignity of the human person is also at the heart of the Sustainable Development Goals with their commitment to leaving no one behind and to paying particular attention to the voices of the poorest and most vulnerable.

These goals set at the United Nations were created through an open process and are universally applicable to all countries, breaking down the paradigm in which poor countries were often left to carry the burden

for change, and also aligning them with a vision where “*everything is connected*,” as articulated by *Laudato Si*. The Sustainable Development Goals are interlinked and indivisible, addressing the environmental, economic and social together.

As many people, including Religious Congregations, re-imagine and re-align their realities with a shift in a rapidly changing world, what steps might be taken/need to be taken in order to respond to the universality of the call? How, for example, have Religious Congregations used the Sustainable Goals to help guide the mission of the Congregation?

**How have pastors, preachers and teachers used the goals to inform and challenge listeners that a more just world is possible? How can we help each other to decode and interpret the message of the Magnificat and the revolutionary call therein?**



UN Photo/Logan Abassi



## 2. From “Band Aid” to Advocacy – A new movement in Consciousness?

UN Photo/Sagona

When we reflect and ‘own’ the dialogue of Mary with Elizabeth and the mutual sharing between the two women, a new energy filled with possibilities begins to emerge.

Mary’s border crossing journey and concern for the welfare of Elizabeth extended far beyond her own immediate circle. The Visitation is not the portrait of a withdrawn, stay-at-home mum. In her song of greeting, the Magnificat, Mary, the pregnant Mother of God, articulates and celebrates the scattering of the proud, the dethroning of the mighty and the raising of the debased. As her son eventually does in the Beatitudes, she not only blesses the poor and promises the feeding of the hungry, but she also predicts barren times for the rich, who will be sent empty away. Mary challenges unjust systems and voices her concern for the impoverished human person.

As we reflect on the Sustainable Development Goals in the spirit of the Visitation encounter, the invitation is clear... Collaborating for Global Systemic Change invites us to promote the wisdom of all cultures and traditions by promoting a call:

- To Global Citizenship;
- To participate in movements from separation to communion by facilitating communion among the world’s faith traditions;
- To have accountable, mutually responsible conversations;
- To become partners with others and share resources to engage collaboratively in global systemic change ministries.

Facing the realities that challenge us and the obstacles that paralyse us, we turn to the Word of God for light and courage to grapple with the problems of our times, made all the more difficult by an out-of-control virus ravishing the world. The Visitation encounter has many lessons for us today. An authentic commitment to reflection and dialogue will lead to the building up of the vulnerable, including ourselves. It is an invitation to a new sensitivity and focus in order to better grasp “the cries of the earth and the cries of the people”. When we listen well to these cries, we sense the urgency for action and will hear the cry of God in everything that is wounded, threatened or excluded. If we respond to these cries, *together* we will be opened up to new journeys of hope.

But how do we get this point? As we saw earlier, there are many Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) at the United Nations, including many Congregations who have invested major resources into having a representative in this space where the heartbeat of the world is monitored. For example, most of the women and men who represent their Congregations come from a background as trained teachers, lawyers, community activists and healthcare workers, with experience in multiple ministries focusing on the empowerment of people. As Congregations the world over grapple with the realization of fewer new members



and the care for our frail elderly tends to become a dominant focus, we are all beginning to realize that our “Band-Aid” approaches to the needs of the vulnerable are just that. As one veteran Sister NGO said so well: “The needs will remain far greater than we can ever address and more and more of our sisters and brothers will become impoverished unless we address the very structures that create the ever deepening chasms between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have-nots.’”<sup>12</sup>

“Before I became an NGO at the United Nations, I spent close to 20 years in various countries on the continent of Africa. Oftentimes we purposefully kept our distances from NGOs that frequently seemed to be a ‘front’ for ambitious politicians. I have quite a different perspective now. With my colleagues in the NGO community in New York, I came to appreciate the influence we could have on the intergovernmental process through persuasion and capitalizing on our moral authority. Governments knew we were representing the folk on the ground who were doing the spade work among their people through education, health services and development programs. We were seen as sincere in our commitment to live out a universal sisterhood. My NGO service gave me insight into a dimension of our identity beyond the fact that we are valued and faith-based long-term service providers who relentlessly advocate for social justice.

**We are groups of committed people in this work for the long haul.”<sup>13</sup>**

When we listen and speak with each other as Mary and Elizabeth did, we come to understand the dynamic of interdependence. It creates an attitude of mutuality and, consequently, to letting go of the concept that we are experts in all fields, that we shower others with our knowledge or skills while those others have little, if anything, to offer us in return. A spirit of interdependence and dialogue encourages us to listen, not only to words, but also to attitudes, gestures and silence.

### 3. Mutuality and Interdependence: How have we dealt with these concepts?



In an age of extremism, ethical tensions, civilizational clashes and the use of religion to justify unspeakable terror, humanity finds itself once again in the red zone. Observing what is happening around us, in both the body politics and the economic zones, the centrality of the common good and focus on human dignity seems to be fading. Too often markets serve those who pay, but what of those who cannot pay? As so tragically demonstrated by the Covid-19 global pandemic which is currently ravaging our world, we witness the most vulnerable paying the

heaviest price. We are at a crossroads and there is much paralysis and fear all around. At a time of so much turmoil, HOPE matters and we cannot live without it. This time teaches us that HOPE is not a wish. It is a course of action, a combination of mind and heart. We are in this together.

How, then, do we move on from this place of fear or even paralysis? Again, we are invited to return to the Visitation encounter:

“Afterward, Mary moved from fear  
*(Will they drag me to the stoning place?)*  
 to pain. *(Will Joseph doubt my faithfulness?)*  
 to trust *(I fear no evil – Thou are with me.)*  
 and back again to fear. ‘I must go to my cousin,’  
 she said, and set out in haste for Judea.

And as her feet unraveled the warp and woof  
 of valleys and hills, darkness and days  
 from Nazareth to Elizabeth  
 Mary busily wove the heart of her son.”<sup>14</sup>



The vision of the writers of the Sustainable Development Goals was for a world which would embrace the dignity of difference and recognise the importance of interdependence and connectedness. Interdependence comprises many dimensions and recognizes that “when we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe.”



As the global pandemic has highlighted, the world we inhabit today with our new systems of global networking and means of communication offers us the privilege to live in dialogue with our brothers and sisters from all continents, knowing that the chain which connects the human family only has the strength of its most fragile link and, therefore, human distress, wherever it occurs, must concern us all.

Throughout most of our histories and until very recently, most people lived their lives surrounded by others with whom they shared a faith, a tradition, a way of life, a set of rituals and narratives of memory and hope. Under such circumstances, it was possible to believe that our truth was the only truth, our way the only way. Outsiders were few; dissidents fewer still. That is not our situation today. We live in the conscious presence of difference. In the street, in the workplace, on the television, in our schools and communities, we are constantly encountering cultures, ideas and ideals very different from our own.

The question is: Have we embraced these differences? Or have we ignored or tried to mould the “other” in our midst into something more familiar?



The question is: Have we embraced these differences? Or have we ignored or tried to mould the “other” in our midst into something more familiar?

In addressing the idea that we live in the conscious presence of difference, Cecile Meijer, RSCJ reminds us that: “The presence of God within all creation is not only repeated over and over again in the Scriptures, this life-giving breath of God has been sustaining energy throughout our human history.” Thomas Merton articulates this reality of the *God Within* in these words: “God has, so to speak, put something of the divine goodness in everything. There are holy sparks in all created beings. The human task is to see these things and to liberate the divine sparks in creation by praise, love and joy.”<sup>15</sup>

A meticulous advocate and educator, Meijer says:

“Respect for each human being and organism on planet Earth – persons, animals, plants, etc. – as God’s home breaks down walls and prejudices. What it boils down to is the realization that if God lives in me, then God lives equally in my neighbor and in everything that breathes – everything that is.”



“This awareness has huge implications. For example, as Christians we are continuously invited to make room for God, to widen the flaps of our tent, so to speak.

But if God lives equally in other people, doesn't this mean that we are called to make it possible for other people to widen the flaps of their tents by living in more dignity? Doesn't that challenge us to work for structural change so that the growing inequalities within and among countries can be addressed?”<sup>16</sup>



Sadly, in recent years, our world has both witnessed and experienced a coarsening of discourse in the political realm. Demonizing the “other”, instead of disagreeing civilly and attempting to arrive through compromise at consensus, has become the norm. How can we educate and invite each other to shift our ‘safe-zone’ thinking and journey toward the “other”, embracing the concept of oneness and the realisation that we are all in this together?



## 4. Oneness

As a human family, more and more we see diversity and multiculturalism everywhere. How do we learn to dialogue and respect the dignity of differences?

The Visitation of Mary and Elizabeth invites us to foster openness to different ways of thinking, speaking and acting. There are no strangers in a Visitation encounter. The women, in respectful dialogue, experience the divine life, not in isolation, but as shared discovery. The visit, initiated by the younger woman, enables them to speak their truth to one another in trust and in love. There is a sense of oneness in the speech, in the interaction and in the listening. A patriarchal reading of this encounter might suggest that one woman is more important than the other, and that it is the act of giving birth to their respective boy children that gives the women their status. It might even suggest that they will become irrelevant to the divine plan – lost even – once their sons begin the real work!

When we interpret the meeting of the two women in this manner, it is to miss what is happening between them and it fails to grasp the essentials of their discourse. What lies ahead is uncharted, unfurling in the midst. But somehow they knew that fear can keep us tethered, while trust and hope can lighten the way.

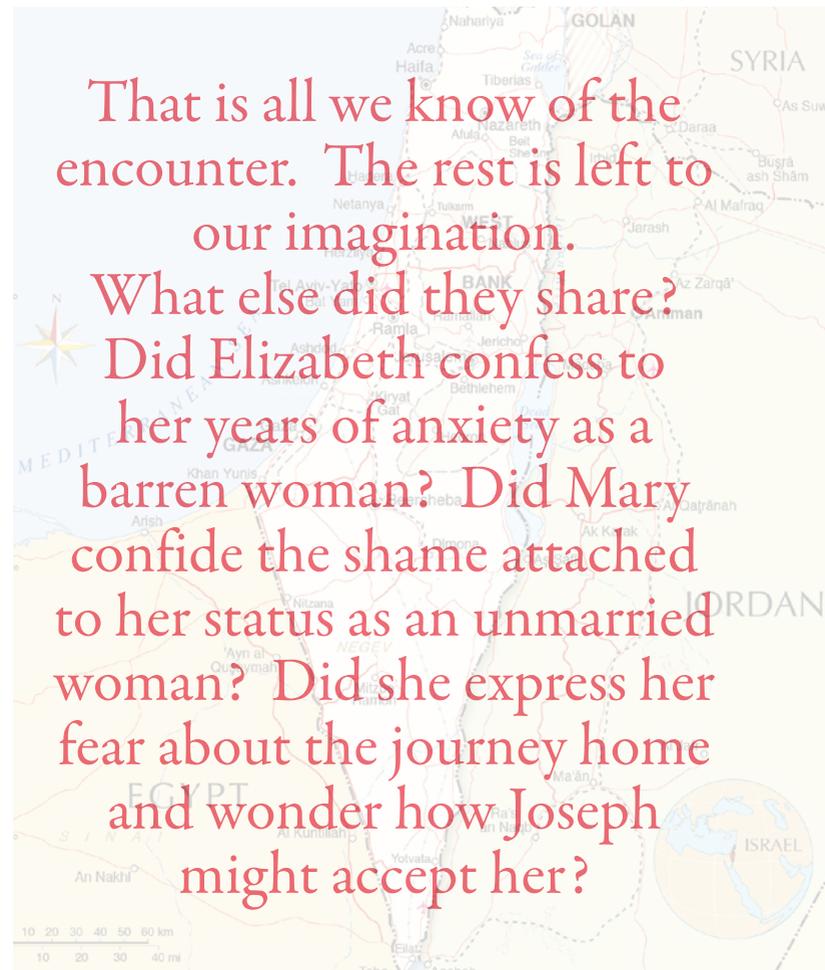
Notice what the women do.



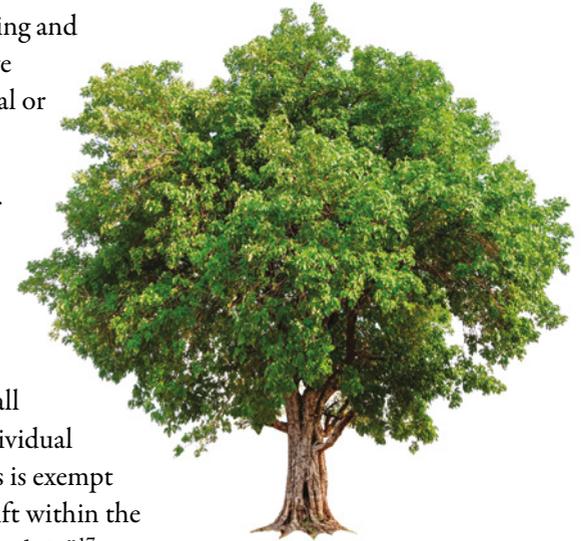
They speak in turn; they build on each other's revelation, perception and interpretation. They seek the meaning of what has happened together and in dialogue.

In this place of trust, where it is safe to speak their partial truth and insights, the meaning builds reciprocally. Mary's Magnificat is particularly poignant for marginalized and oppressed people when she proclaims a reversal of power relationships, as they know them. Just as Elizabeth needs Mary, so too does Mary need Elizabeth. What God is doing in each of them can only be understood as the mystery unfolds. The text tells us that:

“Mary stayed with Elizabeth three months and then went back home.”



In his book, *Faith in the Public Square*, Archbishop Rowan Williams speaks about the ideal of mutuality having an organic quality. He says that our common identity is shaped by the fact that each one of us depends on all others for their life: “No element in the body is dispensable or superfluous; what affects one affects all, for good and ill, since both suffering and flourishing belong to the entire organism, not to any individual or purely local grouping. As Williams sees it, each is called to see himself or herself as helpless when alone, but gifted in relationship. Such an ideal proposes the model of human life together that insists on the fact that we are all involved in the fate of any individual or group and that no one of us is exempt from danger or incapable of gift within the community of life as God intends it.”<sup>17</sup>



The meeting of peoples from across the globe at United Nations headquarters to write and then proclaim a new world order, when seen in the context of the Visitation encounter, was – and is – a reminder to us all that we are travelling through one another's countries. When strangers join forces and try to create the future we all need and want, a transformative, people-centred focus which cares for our planetary home is possible. How, then, do we move the message beyond factual deluge to behaviours which are respectful to all?

The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, together with *Laudato Si'*, are key to our survival as a species. In attempting to shed light on our understanding of the common good, John Studzinski, co-founder of the anti-slavery movement ARISE, speaks very candidly and prophetically about the *common good*, especially at a time of global pandemic:



“The coronavirus has tightened its grip, making the world a dramatically smaller place. As self-isolation turns from option to imperative, our personal world is shrinking too. In a lockdown, frustration becomes inevitable, but there is nothing to be gained from venting it. We must remember that we are confining ourselves for the sake of others and that our customary freedoms have always been a privilege. (We can use Pandemic images here) Now, deprived of some of them, we can learn lessons in fortitude and resilience, but also in generosity, public-spiritedness and compassion. This crisis reveals much about humanity. It exposes the dangers of exploiting of God’s earth and the other species that live upon it. It shows how fear can take hold more quickly than even the most novel virus... Just months ago, we did not foresee how our physical horizons would narrow and our unmediated interaction with the broader world would diminish. Perhaps this unexpected separation from society can become an opportunity to reassess our lives and maybe even experience a rebirth. This is about far more than self-preservation or even the protection of those dear to us... This is a moment for us to look at where we are now, where we came from and where we are going, to build and deepen our relationship with nature and with God.”<sup>18</sup>



Just as Mary and Elizabeth journeyed towards one another, how can we seize this, our moment, as we journey into the great unknown? Pope Francis has called on us all to participate in a global conversation on the future of life on our planet. Perhaps there is an opportunity to use the United Nations global goals as a tool to discuss human flourishing and care for our common home, based on the values of solidarity, inclusion, oneness, participation and environmental consciousness.

How might we take up or even encourage this challenge?

## 5. Global Awareness and Solidarity

Visitation spirituality fosters openness to different ways of thinking and invites us to be attentive in ways that are wider than one's own family, locality and nationality. Catherine McAuley reminded the early Sisters of Mercy of this when she said: "Each place has its own particular ideas and feelings which must be yielded to when possible."<sup>19</sup>

Contrary to the spirit of openness to difference and an appreciation of the richness of others, our world today appears to be one where productivity at all costs is all that matters. It does not seem to value the primacy of the human person and often tends to set people one against the other. We now inhabit a world where maximizing profit [at all cost] is the norm.

**We live in a world where WATER, that most basic human right and crucial in the fight to combat Covid-19, is now trading on Wall Street!**

National frontiers are no longer an obstacle for people who want to produce with the smallest cost and to sell with the most profit, and workers are being crushed in the process. Today, women and men of conscience have a timely burden and a rare opportunity to educate and encourage others towards the idea of solidarity as global citizens.

A Global Citizen is a Magnificat citizen in that they see a whole world-view. In his encyclical *Fratelli tutti*, issued in October 2020,

**Pope Francis said that in today's world, the sense of belonging to a single human family is fading, and the dream of working together for justice and peace seems an outdated utopia.**

What reigns instead is a cool, comfortable and globalized indifference, born of deep disillusionment concealed behind a deceptive illusion: thinking that we are all-powerful, while failing to realize that we are all in the same boat. This illusion, unmindful of the great fraternal values,

leads to "a sort of cynicism. For that is the temptation we face if we go down the road of disenchantment and disappointment... Isolation and withdrawal into one's own interests are never the way to restore hope and bring about renewal. Rather, it is closeness; it is the culture of encounter. Isolation, no; closeness, yes. Culture clash, no; culture of encounter, yes".

Today, the remnants of contemporary religious life are being invited to join with others, to listen, to hear, to be bold of speech and courageous in action, to act locally as pro-active participants in a global society. The contemporary call is to encourage each other to think outside the box, to be actively engaged and participative constituents with others on a sustainable global journey. This global community is summed up by Helen Marie Burns, RSM, when she says: "Our 'unknowing' (of what is going on around us) that most threatens the future of planet earth rests in the deliberate limitation of one's horizon of knowing: a tendency to isolate ourselves from the knowledge of those who are too different from ourselves, who are too distant from our lifestyle and cultural milieu, who are too fragile and vulnerable."<sup>20</sup>

**Aware that we are living in historic times of change and uncertainty, how do we respond to the call of this, our time, with the same daring and trust as Mary and Elizabeth? How can we proclaim with respectful courage: We cannot be silent!**

**What borders or new frontiers, both mentally and physically, do we need to cross to accompany and defend new life emerging in different parts of our world?**

**How do we endeavour to live a life focused on the common good rather than one fixated on our own little corner of reality?**

**How do we monitor, both individually and collectively, our unity in diversity while at the same time linking and connecting with other bodies in our world, in order to stand in solidarity with those left on the outside?**



## Conclusion – Who will do this work?

Having reflected upon and imagined the encounter of the Visitation women and the vision articulated in both the Sustainable Development Goals and *Laudato Si'*, how can each one of us help this moment in history come alive as a compassionate force for good?

Those who do the prophetic work of carrying out the Gospel message often do so away from the glare of the cameras. “Only a few achieve the colossal task of holding together, without being split asunder, the clarity of their vision alongside an ability to take their place in a materialistic world. They are the modern heroes.”<sup>21</sup>

And to answer the question: **Who will do this work?** Or with whom shall we journey as we strive to implement a new world order, as envisaged in the vision and directives of *Laudato Si'*, and the Sustainable Development Goals?

- Hopefully, like the giants who went before us, we will continue to be trailblazers, challenging unjust systems of domination in our respective societies and institutions.
- Hopefully, by our choices and lifestyle we will witness and acknowledge the devastating effects of economic systems on peoples, cultures, ecosystems and planet earth, and work with others to implement change.
- Hopefully, with frankness and honesty, we will acknowledge why so many of us simply do not want to know; and strive to find ways to encourage one another in the spirit of the Visitation journey.

Finally, as the Nobel Laureate Seamus Heaney said so eloquently:

Human beings suffer,  
they torture one another,  
they get hurt and get hard.  
No poem or play or song  
can fully right a wrong  
inflicted or endured.

The innocent in gaols  
beat on their bars together.  
A hunger-striker's father  
stands in the graveyard dumb.  
The police widow in veils  
faints at the funeral home.

History says, Don't hope  
on this side of the grave.  
But then, once in a lifetime  
the longed for tidal wave  
of justice can rise up,  
and hope and history rhyme.

So hope for a great sea-change  
on the far side of revenge.  
Believe that a further shore  
is reachable from here.  
Believe in miracles  
and cures and healing wells.

Call the miracle self-healing:  
The utter self-revealing  
double-take of feeling.  
If there's fire on the mountain  
or lightning and storm  
and a god speaks from the sky

That means someone is hearing  
the outcry and the birth-cry  
of new life at its term.

Perhaps – just perhaps – as Mary and Elizabeth's journeys, together and separately, took them to unknown places, we may, inspired by Mary's words in the Visitation, open ourselves to the God of Surprises, hear the cries of the earth and of the poor, and go in haste on a journey, believing in miracles that “God, wonderful in power, will continue to use Divine strength in me.”

May we all believe in miracles and know that God works in us through our response.

Catherine Prendergast, DC  
Deirdre Mullan, RSM  
March 2021

# Mary's Song: The Magnificat

And Mary said:

☺☺ *My soul glorifies the Lord  
and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,  
for he has been mindful  
of the humble state of his servant.*

*From now on all generations will call me blessed,  
for the Mighty One has done great things for me—  
holy is his name.*

*His mercy extends to those who fear him,  
from generation to generation.*

*He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;  
he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.*

*He has brought down rulers from their thrones  
but has lifted up the humble.*

*He has filled the hungry with good things  
but has sent the rich away empty.*

*He has helped his servant Israel,  
remembering to be merciful  
to Abraham and his descendants forever,  
just as he promised our ancestors.* ☺☺

Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home.

Luke 1:46-56, New International Version

# Sustainable Development Goals

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), also known as the Global Goals, were adopted by all United Nations Member States in 2015 as a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity by 2030.

- Goal 1: End poverty in all its forms everywhere.
- Goal 2: End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture.
- Goal 3: Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages.
- Goal 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.
- Goal 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.
- Goal 6: Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all.
- Goal 7: Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all.
- Goal 8: Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all.
- Goal 9: Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation.
- Goal 10: Reduce inequality within and among countries.
- Goal 11: Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.
- Goal 12: Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns.
- Goal 13: Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts.
- Goal 14: Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development.

- Goal 15: Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss.
- Goal 16: Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.
- Goal 17: Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development.



<https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/sustainable-development-goals.html>

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Deirdre Mullan RSM  
Catherine Prendergast DC  
April 2021

*For Wendy Whitworth  
in gratitude.*

## Endnotes

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