

Spiritual Reflections on the Natural World – Ecology Spaces in China

During three ecology workshops given in China by the Irish geologist and botanist John Feehan between 2014 and 2018, an emphasis was placed on combining personal experience with scientific learning and prayerful reflection. Personal experience involved going outdoors each day to observe nearby geological formations as well as looking at the marvels of wildflowers and other features of the natural world. In looking at the wildflowers, we were asked to consider the marvelous ways in which these flowers live within a series of mysterious relationships that require a moth or a bee to complete a pollination cycle so that the next generation of flowers can emerge a year later.



John Feehan in China – October 2018

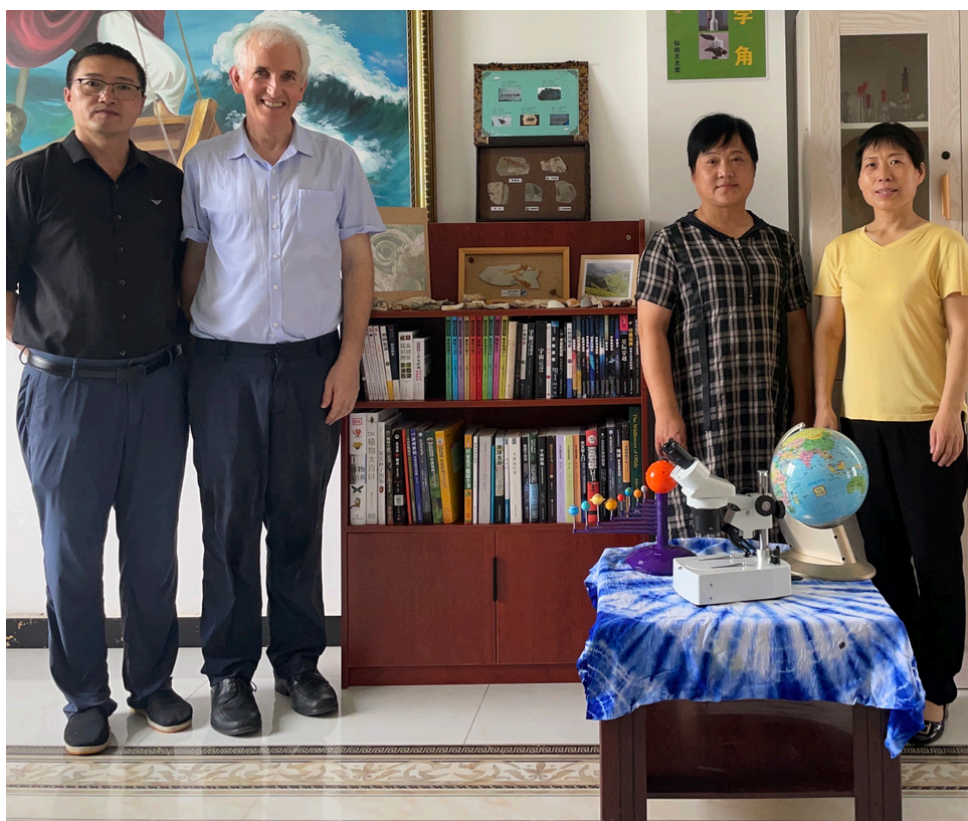
A further probing of mystery took place when participants used hand lenses and microscopes to look further into the depths of the flowers, the revealed beauty being an experience of awe for those who were seeing with new eyes. Occasionally within the depths of a small flower, a tiny insect was seen moving around in its colourful home, a further experience of amazement as life in a world of other dimensions was observed. During these experiences and in the lectures that were part of the week-long workshops, John Feehan would also pose a crucial question, “what does this tell us about God?”

This same question is at the heart of the 2015 encyclical written by Pope Francis on the care of our common home, this beautiful but fragile planet where we live. In the early part of *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis invites us “to see nature as a magnificent book in which God speaks to us and grants us a glimpse of his infinite beauty and goodness” (LS 12). This understanding is attributed to St. Francis of Assisi. This wonderful saint understood that God created each form of life with loving care and attention, all of these life forms assigned a unique place within an immense universe that was created with the same loving care, a universe that continues to unfold over the vast expanses of time and space. Pope Francis also reminds us that the inexhaustible richness of God is reflected in the vast diversity of the natural world, no one species being capable of fully representing divine goodness, the vast array of biodiversity therefore being an expression of the immense depths of God.

Emerging from these workshops in China, the Columbans initiated a project to establish ecology spaces at retreat houses, pastoral centres and convents in China. During a recent visit to the pastoral centre in Xiantao, near Wuhan, Fr. Joseph Li, administrator of the Diocese of Hanyang, delighted in showing me the ecology space that he has put in place. The top shelf is a space to hold fossils, shells and stones, each

reflecting a unique aspect of God's creation. Holding a fossil, a shell or a stone can be the beginning of a reflective experience on the mystery that has formed these items over the eons of time. When examined slowly and carefully, the distinctive shape and the unique combination of colours that forms each of these is a way to reach deeper into the mystery that shapes the natural world. Seeing the uniqueness of these small items can allow us to see in a new way how the mystery of our creative God permeates the entire world.

The ecology space at the pastoral centre in Xiantao also includes books on astronomy, geology, botany and other life sciences. With the immense growth of scientific knowledge over recent decades, the scientific community provides the Church with a new perspective to understand in a deeper way the meaning of the creation story that is presented to us in the Book of Genesis. The lifetimes of dedicated research by specialists in these areas provide us with insights into the mysteries of life that were not available to previous generations. This requires that our image of God will be broad enough to include all the insights that emerge from the scientific community. As scientific knowledge expands, the horizons of our understanding of God also need to grow.



Fr. Joseph Li, Dan Troy, Sr. Paula Li and Sr. Mary Bai
beside the ecology space at Xiantao Pastoral Centre

As we gathered around the ecology space at the pastoral centre in Xiantao, Fr. Joseph mentioned that young people in China are open to this approach to deepen their understanding of God because they are already studying science in their regular education. If their scientific education is accompanied by faith formation that encourages them to appreciate how our creative and loving God is involved in the shaping and unfolding of the universe, they will be able to integrate their education with their Christian faith.

In recent years the Columbans in China have sponsored six communities in various parts of the country to set up ecology spaces, each following a similar design so that items from the natural world are available with relevant books as well as hand lenses and a microscope. As retreats and days of faith formation take

place in these areas of China over the next few years, we hope that participants will deepen their appreciation of the delightful reference by Jesus to the beauty of wildflowers when he said, “not even Solomon in all his royal robes was clothed like one of these” (Mt. 6:29). Hopefully their opportunity to hold a small flower and peer into the depths of beauty bestowed on it by God will stir their hearts to appreciate how God delights in them and all of creation.



Display area of the ecology space