





Mother of Christ, Star of the Sea, pray for the Wanderer, pray for me

For one week at the end of June the entire Parc de Nacoes in the beautiful ancient and modern city of Lisbon was transformed into the United Nations New York campus, flags and all.

The 2022 UN Conference on the Oceans and the progress of Sustainable Development Goal 14 was held in Lisbon. I was fortunate enough to be invited to attend by our NGO in New York. They would pay for my travel. I stayed with the sisters of the Sacred Heart of Mary in their College for girls and boys from ages 4 to 18. Delightfully, the school was still working and although there was no time for a visit there was enough time to be reminded that children are the same the world over!

Although the community could not speak much English and I could not speak Portuguese they were full of kindness and hospitality. There were two sisters from the community also attending the Conference and one from the USA. English is the official language of the United Nations so all the meetings were in English.

In the Opening meeting the Secretary General of the United Nations addressed the assembly, in English but towards the end he said:

"And now, because I am Portuguese and was born in Lisbon, I will speak for a few moments in my own language".

He just said a few words of thanks to the people of Lisbon for welcoming the world to their city. I was really pleased that he did so because it was a diplomatic nod to his own people suggesting that if it had been possible to do things differently the Conference would have been in Portuguese!

We attended each day from 10 am until 6pm, apart from the last day when I was on my own. The two Portuguese sisters had gone to a Council meeting and Virginia had returned to the US. We travelled by metro. All delegates were issued with free transport passes around the city including the Conference venue. These passes lasted until 1 July when the Conference ended.

After forty- eight hours in this slightly unreal environment I decided that anyone not born and raised in Portugal must have been educated by the Loreto Sisters!!!

The Conference was co-hosted by Portugal and Kenya and leaders of both countries were visible for much of the time. (Sadly, I was too busy to speak to them!!) Since we were in Portugal and not in Kenya the African Country brought itself to Lisbon. Kenya had its own way of being present.

The first thing I saw when we arrived in the main area of the meeting place on the first day was the word 'souvenirs' written across a large board under which was the word 'Kenya'. I wandered over. There was nothing much of interest other than little booklets which had 'Passport to Kenya' written on them. As we had plenty of time before the Opening Ceremony at 10am I looked at the little

booklets. They were full of interesting facts about Kenya, clearly encouraging people to visit and possibly invest in projects there.

A young woman from behind the desk came over to me and before she said anything I told her I only spoke English. She spoke perfect English and asked me if I had been to Kenya. You can imagine the conversation that followed. When I finished telling her my 'interest' in Kenya she told me in a very excited voice that she had been at school at Loreto, Valley Road and that her daughter, Abigael, that very morning was beginning her exams at the school. This was a great start for me. I did not know then, but I know now, that the President of Kenya is also a past pupil of Valley Road!

On one morning while we were waiting for the first main meeting of the day I decided to walk down the wide corridor to look at the various desks on both sides. These seemed to be mainly registered charities hoping to secure some funding for their organisations. I was interested most of all in the one which was entitled '*The World's most vulnerable countries, especially those which are not landlocked*'. Below is the organisation's logo.



I began to chat with the smart- looking young man at this desk and thought I recognised an Irish accent. I was right. Conor was from Kildare and had worked for Trocaire before becoming involved with the United Nations. I told him why I was at the conference and he told me his mother, Mary Manning, had been at school in Enniscorthy. She is now 85 years old. It turns out she was in Geraldine's class! When I gave him this information the next day he rang his mother immediately to tell her!

On Tuesday evening we attended a relatively small, informal meeting at the Jesuit College. I had been told about this meeting by Janet and by Veronica Brand in advance and had also made contact, through Janet, with a young woman called Blair. This side event was sponsored by the Sisters of Saint Joseph of Peace. Blair works for them and was their representative at the Conference.

The speakers included a Jesuit priest (who grew up on the shores of the river Shannon,) a Columban Priest from Fiji, a St Joseph of Peace sister and several lay people, one of whom represented Caritas International., plus an Archbishop. All members of this panel belonged to an indigenous group and/or worked with them for most of their lives. In this context it was interesting to read this week that Pope Francis intends to visit the indigenous communities on Turtle Island in an attempt at reconciliation for past injustices.

The meeting was in stark contrast to the other meetings where the policy makers make declarations and promises. These people spoke from their hearts as they described the ocean as their life blood. Each one told his or her own story about tragedy of polluting the oceans and the repercussions. Each story was different but what they had in common was the emotion, and even tears, which came as each one spoke. They were particularly protective of their own small islands. We were reminded that deep sea mining is destroying the livelihood of so many vulnerable people.

There was a prayer at the beginning. It was the first time there had been any kind of spiritual input. When the Archbishop spoke he, too, was very emotional but he spoke firmly about the need for a Language of Spirituality as well as a Language of Science. Deep sea mining is destroying our Earth. The Archbishop emphasised spiritual language and the language of indigenous nations. At the end of the session we were invited to ask questions. I asked about being more involved with young people and encouraging them to be 'ocean literate'. Each speaker addressed the question since there were no others. Afterwards the sister came to speak to me. She was educated by Loreto in Australia and knew all the names I could remember! At the end of this very moving meeting I was

amazed when sang 'Hail Queen of Heaven'. Few people in the room knew it but those of us who did sang it from the heart!

The day after the indigenous community had expressed its concern for a spiritual perspective in terms of the destruction of our planet, especially the oceans, we found ourselves at another side event this time very directly concerning Deep Seabed Mining from the viewpoint of respect for the sacred in the natural world. The title of this meeting was: *The Sea is Sacred: religious respond to Deep Sea Mining* in terms of the challenges that deep seabed mining poses towards managing, protecting, conserving and restoring. To this end faith-based groups at the UN, including the Religious Congregations, supported the intervention prepared last week by Blair Nelson in the name of the Sisters of St Joseph of Peace. Blair was the Moderator of this meeting and later presented her own intervention. This was supported not only by the Sisters of St Joseph of Peace who were sponsoring the event, but by most, if not all faith based institutions at the UN. We were all given the opportunity to make statements, formal or informal. I have included Blair's 'Intervention' below. Apart from the fact that it is a very clear call, it also gives a taste of what the UN is about.

Other key issues which were highlighted throughout the week included: pollution of the oceans, persistent use of fossil fuels and misuse of plastic. Solutions being suggested included 'Ocean Literacy', need for greater awareness in schools of the problem of care of the Oceans. Better research and correct information and data so that scientists and others may identify the problems and especially illegal activity. Most important there was a call for Civil Society (NGOs) to respond with robust determination. The panellists included members of the clergy, Religious Orders and lay people.

This is Blair's response (Wednesday 29 June 2022. Lisbon Portugal)

Good afternoon.
Distinguished delegates,

I speak on behalf of the NGO Mining Working Group and the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Joseph of peace. As a faith-based NGO, we are grateful for the opportunity to provide comment as part of the proceedings of the 2022 UN Ocean Conference. As a distinguished Catholic order with a 138-year history, we take seriously our moral obligation to care for Creation and practice integral ecology, as Pope Francis has called on us to do through the encyclical *Laudato Si'*. We join the conference organizers in raising alarm about the crises that our oceans face in the immediate future.

As people of faith who believe in the sacredness of all life, we believe that all conference proceedings and documents need to reflect worldviews grounded in interconnectedness, interdependence and relationship. Without such perspectives, the proceedings will fail to speak to the sacred wisdom and experiences of many people whose voices might otherwise be obscured, including indigenous peoples, spiritual communities, and faith groups.

In order to fully realize the potential of this conference, we encourage all delegates to use this opportunity to address a pressing issue that poses a significant threat to ocean well-being: deep seabed mining (DSM). There are alarming gaps in our knowledge about DSM's impacts that potentially pose a significant risk of causing severe harm to marine biodiversity, coastal communities, and the entire planet through the disruption of the carbon cycle. DSM would likely lead to increased ocean pollution as it disturbs the sea floor, causing habitat loss, seafloor compaction, and substrate loss. This harmful practice could threaten the livelihoods of coastal communities, and it would stymie the future of marine scientific discoveries. **Most alarmingly, deep seabed mining threatens to disrupt the global carbon cycle, accelerating climate change at the worst possible moment in history.** The oceans are in urgent need of safeguarding as our most valuable carbon sink, and the time to protect them is now.

This practice threatens to undo much of the good that could emerge from this historic conference unless delegates take a strong stance against it. **We call on parties to endorse a global ban on deep seabed mining.** Through technological innovation and incentivizing the recycling of minerals, we can meet our future mineral and energy needs while building a circular economy that forefronts the land-sea linkages needed for a future that is as blue as it is green.

Thank you.

Blair Nelsen

Executive Director, Waterspirit ministry

UN-NGO Representative, Congregation of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace.

These Sisters have recently reached their target in their investments to become totally fossil-free. They are pioneers in their own right.

Front page: This beautiful cuddly toy perched itself on a plinth and never took its eyes off the delegates at the **UN Conference on the Oceans!!!** I passed him every day and took this photograph on the last afternoon. In many ways it sums up my own thoughts about the Cry of the Earth and the Cry of the Poor. Sometimes the eyes of the cat look frightened, and despairing, sometimes belligerent, and unbending, sometimes courageous or pleading. In other moments the eyes look hopeful, even triumphant but most of all they look as though they are waiting tentatively knowing that one day things can and will be different and the cat will have a coat of beautiful fur, a natural coat of beauty because, like the planet on which he lives, the cat, too, is created by God.

The Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Mary were outstanding in their hospitality, their graciousness and their thoughtfulness. One of my many 'best' memories will be a conversation, mostly in Spanish about one of their most famous (to them!) women poets. I found some translations of some of her work and between us we had some 'interesting' conversations. Those who had been to Penmaenmawr had also heard of Gerard Manley Hopkins...a great bonus for me.

Whilst waiting in the long queue to check in baggage I began speaking to another lady travelling alone who asked me if I had been on holiday in Portugal. I did not see her again until we were walking towards the exit at Manchester Airport. She asked me if I lived in Manchester. I asked her the same. She said to me, 'No, I live in York.' Where do you suppose she lived in York? **Osbaldwick!!**

The Sea

From all the corners of the world
I love with the strongest and most profound love
That rapturous and naked beach,
Where I united myself with the sea,
With the wind and with the Moon.

I smell the Earth, the trees and the wind
That the Spring fills with perfumes
But in them I only want and I only seek
The wild Exhalation of the waves
Riding to the stars like a pure scream. (Trans)

Sophia de Mello Breyner Andresen (1919- 2004)
Portuguese poet and writer

