



The Lauriston Jesuit Centre

Finding God In All Things



Mary Colwell



On Thin Ice - The Churches and the Environment

Mary Colwell at the Lauriston Jesuit Centre - November 10th 7.30 p.m.

A major event in November at the Lauriston Jesuit Centre was the visit of Mary Colwell, senior producer at the BBC Natural History Unit. The title of her presentation on the 10th was 'On Thin Ice – The Churches and the Environment', which looked at the possibilities and the responsibilities of the churches concerning care for the environment. The evening was attended by both Cardinal Keith Patrick O'Brien and by Fr Provincial, Michael Holman. Also involved in the night were Professor Aubrey Manning and Owen Dudley Edwards, both of Edinburgh University.

As a producer at the BBC Mary has access to a marvellous range of resources, including television and radio programmes she herself has produced, and also the whole library of BBC natural history materials. Her judicious use of these resources made her presentation very striking and dynamic, and showed in graphic detail the beauty and majesty of this world of ours, but also the perils and crisis it faces.

Her starting point was the relatively poor response from the churches, especially the Catholic church as this is the church she knows best, to the environmental crisis facing us. Alarmed by the lack of reference to the earth, ecology or environment in her Catholic Encyclopaedia she found she had to dig quite deeply elsewhere to find evidence that the church is concerned. She then took as an illustration the environmental record of prominent Catholic countries, and was alarmed by the extent of environmental damage being done in such places as Brazil and the Philippines.

She put the issue of care for the environment squarely in the camp of morality, seeing it as a matter of respect and justice. She then considered these two notions and noted that respect has to be at the heart of all relationships, and justice at the heart of all religions.

With her expert use of multimedia she both enthralled us with the beauty of the natural world, and appalled us with the destruction of that same world taking place at the hands of humanity.

Reflecting on the environmental warnings given in documentaries over the past 20 years she wondered if anything had changed in respect of what those films showed but concluded that things had changed only for the worse. Technology now allows for fishing in the deep oceans, for example, having an even more devastating effect on the seas than was thought possible.

Reflecting on the role of religion, Mary gave great insights and challenges. Religions, she believes, understand what touches people at the deepest level of their being and she gave as an example the need to celebrate. She drew from this that we, too, could celebrate the earth more than we already do, recognise all it gives us, and recognise our duty of care. She asked poignantly "where is the liturgy and the music that slams it home to people we have an amazing planet and a lot to be grateful for"?

Where indeed. What Mary left us with was a sense of urgency and duty, but not one of despair or inevitability. It was a most uplifting and inspiring presentation, yet fundamentally challenging.