

NJPN Column in the Catholic Universe: Paul Southgate – Hell is a Dustbowl

This month I begin work in the allotment in earnest. I remember that there is no such thing as permanently perfect soil. All things change. You can only aim at having a vigorous, living, breathing soil. It's like justice and peace: "Goodness, together with love, justice and solidarity are not achieved once and for all; they have to be realised each day" (Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti* 11).

The scariest verse in the Bible for me is Genesis 3:19: "For you are dust and to dust you will return." Dust is dead. It does nothing and gives nothing up. It has no value. Hell is a dustbowl. Soil, in contrast, is a living organism, or rather a collection of organisms, and it must be fed. Soil both craves life and wants to produce more life, even a hundredfold. It teems with life and vitality, fertility and fruitfulness. If you want to feed people you need good soil. Feed the soil, and the soil will feed the plants, and plants will feed the people. 'Garden' is our oldest metaphor.

Cardinal Hume introduced the Bishops' 1996 document '*Common Good*' with: "The future of humanity does not depend on political reform, social revolution or scientific advance. Something else is needed. It starts with a true conversion of mind and heart." Nearly 25 years later, Pope Francis says, "Our civilisation needs to downshift, take stock and renew itself."

Yes, we need conversion, a renewal of civilisation. And it begins in us. Conversion allows us a different way of discovering and living the truth. It generates originality in thinking and planning that can yield unexpected results. Conversion is not a once-for-all act but a growing conviction, a daily discernment and decision.

NJPN's 23-25 July 2021 annual Conference calls us to ecological conversion. We cannot let ourselves be confined, conditioned and conformed to "what is", but must ask "What can be, and how do we get there?" Not "if only" but "what if?"

The history of our friendship with God is full of conversions. Every encounter with God is such. In *Laudato Si* Pope Francis joined the dots. Do we drink from the living water of God's Spirit or from "other sources"? It's time to think seriously about feeding our garden Earth, not poisoning it; to choose soil, not dust.
Sign up and join us!

Paul Southgate is a member of the J&P Co-ordinating Council in Hexham & Newcastle diocese, and Chair of the National Justice & Peace Network (NJPN).

NJPN Conference 23-25 July at <https://www.justice-and-peace.org.uk/conference/>