

How do I relate to the earth?

Dearly beloved person,

Almost five years ago, my wife and I moved to Rockanje. Getting to know our immediate neighbours was quick, as there were only four addresses on our street, and we soon got to know others in the village and the (Apostolic) community. But what also followed was a fascinating introduction to even more neighbours. I was used to keeping track of how many birds I saw from my house and garden. However, by paying more and more attention to very small neighbours, I embarked on a fascinating journey of discovery, getting to know neighbours with names ranging from *Acanthosoma* to *Athalia*, *Donacia* and *Liliocera* to *Zygiella*... My garden turned out to be inhabited by a multitude of interesting neighbours, whom I got to know little by little. In 2020, ecologist Luc Hoogenstein¹ attempted to find 1,000 different species, more or less forced by restrictions imposed during the coronavirus pandemic, including long covid. Throughout the Netherlands? No, in his garden and immediate surroundings, 200 square metres in the middle of Utrecht. That year, he found 1,496 species, and the counter kept going! So many species, often in complex relationships with each other, and so close by. Isn't that wonderful? But often you only see it when it is pointed out to you or when you really want to think about it...

Our relationship with our human neighbours can sometimes be very complex. In addition, there is the enormous diversity of species to which we must also relate, because there is a biodiversity crisis underway. Through all kinds of activities, even if it is just turning a green garden into a tile paradise, we are making life very difficult for all those 'neighbours of other species. I deliberately call them "neighbours": they have lived there for a long time. And we believe that everything stems from the same source... Our individual behaviour, the choices we make, matter to other people, but also to all those other creatures that are simply our family. A fruit fly has almost half the same genes as I do! Most people would kill a mosquito. Buddhism teaches us to say "sorry" to that mosquito. Rightly so, I think; it is a way of looking at things.

In my work as a teacher, I do not want to just impart knowledge. That's why I now finish every lesson with the simple call to action: "Reduce, reuse, recycle & let love guide you". Sometimes I add a brief explanation. Apparently, there is power in repetition, because the number of times it is said is kept track of, I get comments when I skip it, and it is already written in the margins of a number of notebooks. Hopefully, this will encourage an attitude towards life that focuses on treating the earth with care, and treating and thinking about each other with love.

In our Apostolic Society, we have long summarised the goal of our work as “working with love towards a humane world”. For me, “humane” (human dignity) also means that we, as dignified people, treat each other *and* the earth and all its inhabitants accordingly. Spending money can easily be thoughtless, but the impact that consumption has on the world is not the same for every purchase. Something that appears, on the surface, to cost little can, on the other side of the world, cause a lot of pollution and soil depletion, or contribute to the kind of climate change we do not want... and as somewhat intelligent beings, we can take that into account.

Life is a quest. Sometimes you live a little on autopilot or in survival mode. But at other times, hopefully there is room to reflect on your relationship with the other and with others and to adjust it where necessary. Love requires a gesture, and that can be in doing *and* in letting go, in what is seen *and* in the silence of one's own thoughts. I want to practise that attitude to life every day. I think it is good that we reflect on this (again 😊) and recommit ourselves to it.

With a warm-hearted greeting,

Ruud Lekkerkerk in liaison with Alexander Tuinstra and Maaïke Blomsma

¹ Luc Hoogenstein, *'My 1000 Species of Garden'* For me, 'human dignity' also means that we, as dignified people, treat each other and the earth with all its inhabitants accordingly, Noordboek natuur 2023, ISBN 978-90-5liefde 615-954-2