



La Vista Visions

A NEWSLETTER ON THE INTEGRITY OF CREATION

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Barefoot Christmas

By James P. Brobst, OMI

It may seem an odd thing to try and remember, but it is something I'm sure we've all done at some time. And I'm embarrassed to say that it took a long time to remember. It had just been too long. When was the last time your bare feet touched natural earth? Not cement, not a cultivated yard, not the sand on a human-constructed and maintained beach, but real, unfertilized, unmowed, grass and soil? I am ironically reminded as I sit in my brightly lit Chicago office on a dark late-fall evening of just how disconnected I am from the natural order of which I am allegedly (actually, certainly) a part.

I don't recommend that we all go take a barefoot romp in the snow or frost or whatever's on your Winter ground as you read this. But it is of note that those of us who live a ways north of the equator, the very cosmos itself gives us a heavenly reminder of a great mystery which significantly influenced Christian religious traditions. In the darkest times of the year, when the Earth's annual tilt on its orbit around the sun leaves us creatures literally in the cold and in the dark, Christians have chosen to embrace this time to remember the coming of one who has been called

"the Light of the World." It would seem to us that all creation, in doing what it has for the last 15 billion years or so, responds by nodding its head in approval, and our nights begin to grow shorter, our days longer and brighter.

Unfortunately, we often get sidetracked at this time of

year. Even amidst the commercialism of the season, many try at least to acknowledge Jesus' birth. But we have the opportunity to taste far more than a two-thousand-year-old birthday celebration. Christmas isn't just a celebration of a birthday, but of the incarnation.

If "incarnation" seems like a big word, it

probably should be even bigger. Think about it. God taking human form in our world says something about the potential and dignity of every creature on this planet. We are made in the very image of the same God whom shepherds and magi and poor parents and even beasts worshiped in a manger. And taking on human form means being made of the same stuff you and I are made of - the very stuff of creation.



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Letter from the Director

Winter Greetings to you from the Oblate Ecological Initiative! May the gift of this New Year of life awaken us to create a mutually enhancing relationship with the natural world.

As we ponder Winter, we see much at rest. Harmonizing our human activities with those of the natural world (like Winter's rest) will create a relationship that is indeed mutually enhancing. Questions do emerge however, such as: e "*How to enter into the stillness of Winter while being immersed in a culture driven to mass-produce?*" e "*What of my lifestyle is called into question when I pray for peace?*" e "*What needs to lie dormant at this time?*"



Maurice Lange, OMI

In this fourth issue of "La Vista Visions" we explore this theme of Winter and the stillness it calls forth. Thanks to my classmate Jim Brobst for the seasonal lead article! We also continue the highly acclaimed series "Emergence of an Ecological Vocation": Anne Stotler writes the story of her own deepening awareness of Creation's integrity.

Winter Solstice, 2002

We recognize that Winter's rest sets the stage for the renewed activity of Spring. Thus we look forward to the newness to come.

Newness within this ministry is shown forth by the fresh programs we invite you to (as well as those you may recognize from the past)! You'll notice that we offer programs which explore the Universe Story for both children and adults as well as a weekend specifically for religious.

We also are eager for the inaugural Spring planting of the *Community Supported Garden at La Vista*! Our newly hired head gardener, Amy Cloud, brings a wealth of experience and energy to the land here at La Vista. Amy was raised on a grain and dairy farm in Michigan and recently completed the third of three successive 1- year apprenticeships at leading community supported farms across the country. (Her most recent internship was at *Angelic Organics* which counts the Oblates in Chicago as their garden shareholders!) Amy begins work here this month in the newly completed greenhouse built by the local Rotary Club. The nearby fields, now resting under winter cover crop, eagerly await the first transplants!

Meantime, let's do ourselves and Earth a favor by cutting back and resting from our culturally-induced consumptive patterns. May we engage the long Winter nights for pondering our place within the universe. Sitting with vital questions can bring about a renewed sense of relationship with all that is.

Creating A Mutually Enhancing Human/Earth Relationship

Winter Stillness: Creating an Uncluttered Heart

- e Create a space within your room or home for quiet reflection...construct a simple prayer corner, throw a meditation rug, put a chair near a window and watch a birdfeeder...
- e Reduce your consumption this winter...be creative in ways to simplify.
- e Drive less! Combine your errands into 1 trip ...carpool...ask yourself "Is this trip in the car really necessary?!".
- e Reflect on what you eat. So much of the "food" we mindlessly consume is not nourishing. Can we have the heart to simplify our food choices and possibly eat even less?
- e Read something that truly nourishes! "*Simpler Living, Compassionate Life: A Christian Perspective*" includes essays by leading thinkers as well as a study guide for groups and individuals.
- e Turn off excess lights! Light a candle- it creates more of a Winter mood.

Earth Literacy Program: “Exploring the Sacred Universe”

August 2-9, 2003

During this Summer’s week-long Earth Literacy Program, the Universe Story provides the framework for exploring the meaningful questions of our origin and for reconnecting with Creation and the Creator. As we re-imagine ourselves by way of this new understanding of our origin, radical changes in our human activities and attitudes will be called for. The Universe Story will supply the creative energy needed to accomplish this Great Work. During the final days of the program, as we shift our attention to bioregionalism, we will consider how our cultural activities enhance or degrade local ecosystems.

The Earth Literacy Program is limited to a small number of participants who will live, reflect, and work together in an experiential learning process. In addition to the guided activities and instruction, there is a strong emphasis on immersion into the natural world and on developing practical skills for a more ecologically-conscious life-style. All of the activities are designed to awaken the participants’ creativity and to provide the support of a group of peers who hold the same pursuits.

An important part of the program is developing a deep connection to the land. To this end we strongly encourage the participants to: 1) Share in a simple group ritual of greeting the new day; 2) Choose a sacred site on the land and visit it daily; 3) Spend time in the Community Supported Garden at LaVista and 4) Keep a personal journal. While most of the activities of this week are experientially oriented, there are a few short readings assigned from *The Universe Story* by Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry, in addition to other articles and videos.

To participate in the Earth Literacy Program, please contact Fr. Maurice Lange.
Our program has been inspired by the Earth Literacy Program at Genesis Farm, Blairstown, New Jersey.
Call to inquire about their offerings at (908) 362-6735

Don’t forget to visit the Oblate Ecological Initiative on the web at www.lavistacsa.org

“To deliver oneself up, to hand oneself over, entrust oneself completely to the silence of a wide landscape of woods and hills, or sea, or desert; to sit still while the sun comes up over that land and fills its silence with light. To pray and work in the morning and to labor and rest in the afternoon, and to sit still again in meditation in the evening when night falls upon land and when the silence fills itself with darkness and with stars. This is a true and special vocation.”

(Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude*.)

Emergence of an Ecological Vocation (second in the series)

By Anne Stotler

In today's world, it seems if society has almost as big of a hand in raising children as do the parents. Growing up in the 80's and 90's, I learned that society as a whole shapes us as well as gives us new ideas. However, these ideas are not always the best ideas. It seems so easy to just go along with the crowd and do what others are doing. As I grew up and in the journey of becoming an adult, I saw first hand how society can shape a person.

I always thought that I had a very typical childhood. I was raised by two unbelievably great parents and had an older brother to follow around. But as I have grown up, I think my childhood was far better than typical. I grew up outside of Brighton, IL, on about 15 acres of land. As an adult, I do not have childhood memories of playing with Barbie dolls and make-up. My memories are that of being outside with my family or taking some time by myself. In the winter, we would take walks through the woods in the snow or race up and down the hills on our sleds. In the summer, it was usually time in the pond, pool or my brother and I playing a late evening game of whiffle ball just before the sun went down. Fall and spring brought even more walks through the woods or just sitting outside with my family.



Anne Stotler, Oblate Ecological Initiative administrative assistant, in her second home.

My childhood house was that of a nature park. On a given day, I looked out the window and saw anything from a doe to a blue jay. Rabbits, squirrels, deer, birds, raccoons, possums, frogs, an occasional fox and a distant howl of a coyote could be found in my back yard. As a child, this was what I called home and never thought twice about it. It was something that I thought would always be there and something that I would never have to leave. I did not realize, until I became a young adult, how lucky I was to have such an environment to enjoy as I grew up.

If my family and I were not at our house we could be found at the Lake of the Ozarks at a cabin on the lake. Time spent in the Ozarks consisted of being in the water and being in the boat. Once again, I was surrounded by nature. I can't remember a summer where I did not spend anytime at the lake. It was just one more thing to remind me of how much of my life was spent outside, enjoying Earth in such a natural state.

As I got older and especially when I was able to drive, I began to notice other environments I was going to. It seemed as if there was litter and trash along every road I traveled on. Even neighborhoods in surrounding towns had litter on the streets right in front of their houses. It made me wonder, why would these people just throw things in streets? I would never pollute my back yard in this way. After awhile, my questions and shock were no longer a factor. It was just the way things were, or so I thought. For a long time, that was good enough for me. I didn't litter but I accepted that others did. There are far too many people out there that took the land they lived on for granted and did not even stop to think about the fact that they could be hurting it. In my mind, I was caught up in the other aspects of life: being a teenager, school, my friends and all the other day to day activity. I was always an environmentally aware person but on a small scale. I knew the basics - "don't litter" and "try to recycle."

When I went away to college, there was not much nature to take in. The backyard of trees and animals I was used to seeing out my window was filled with apartment buildings and parking lots. Needless to say, my mind was not on the preserving of Mother Nature. At school I thought that I was doing a good job if I remembered to throw the plastic water bottle or yesterday's newspaper into the appropriate recycle bin on my floor in the dorms. People seem to forget the

smaller, important things of life when they get so involved in their own world. When I lived in my first few apartments, I would say that things got worse. To four college students, taking the extra five minutes to recycle or conserve food was just something that we could not do. But I still had the few weekends at home to put me back into reality and give me the realization of the power of the environment.

Shortly after moving back to the area, I began to work with Father Maurice and the **Oblate Ecological Initiative**. Since that time, my views and ideas are not only changing, but also expanding. There wasn't one thing in particular that prompted my change, it was more something inside myself. While working on the last newsletter, I read the articles several times for editing purposes. But then I really started to absorb the articles for their meaning. Then I was prompted to do more research myself. The more I read, ideas became clear on certain topics. However, there were areas where I was even more confused. But I did get a much better understanding of what was taking place where I worked and why people thought it was a necessary action to work for.

At this point, I am doing all that I can to take in as much knowledge as possible. I realize that my life-style still isn't going to change over night. But I think that I have taken steps to improve it. The first step is simply to have an open mind and have the urge to wonder what else is out there to learn. Now that I live in Alton, IL, on a very crowded street, I still find great joy in going out to my parent's house and sitting on the deck and looking into the woods. But *trying* to recycle is a thing of the past and *actually* recycling has taken over. The best thing for me right now is to gain information and apply it to my life (but also realize that my actions won't be perfect.)

As the media and the world around us try to mold us in every way, it is easy to get caught up in the trivial things of life. I have done it, as I bet a lot of others have as well. But I learned that if it is society and the people around a person who are the influences, all one needs to do is change who the people around them are and educate themselves so they don't need to look to others for their own opinion. In my quest for knowledge I take into consideration that I will never be an expert on the environment or what is intended for it. But that is not why I am trying to educate myself on the subject. According to the Greek concept of *Paideia*, the goal of education is not mastery of subject matter, but mastery of one's person.



Barefoot Christmas (continued from page 1)

As St. Paul reminds us, *He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers--all things have been created through him and for him.* The incarnation speaks not only of human dignity, but the divine potential of every bit of cosmic dust from our galaxy to that which is farthest away. *He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together* (1Cor 15-16). So Christ holds all thing together from the soil that grows the plants we eat, to the air that fills our longing lungs, to the water that slakes our thirst, from the stars whose light winks at us across millions of light years to the dirt and grass under our shod feet. We are made of all this, as was the truly human Jesus who walked the paths we walk and lived the life we live.

Maybe the next time my bare feet touch bare earth won't be anytime very soon, since Winter is now clearly here. But I can still try to be more aware of, and vulnerable to, the goodness of God's creation wherever I can sense it, be it in a snowfall, a morsel of food, or a little human warmth. Everything that we can sense and know is charged with the potential of God's own real presence. And we need to remove our shoes, even if only figuratively, because it is all holy ground. May you have some wonderful, barefoot moments this Christmas season and beyond!



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## How Can I Participate?

All people seeking a mutually enhancing relationship with Earth are welcome to participate in the scheduled programs and the Community Supported Garden of the Oblate Ecological Initiative. Just call or write for more information and/or to register. Due to the wonderful response, we will probably need to put newly interested possible shareholders on a waiting list. Volunteer opportunities definitely exist for different tasks in the office as well as the garden.

Fr. Maurice is also available for presentations and retreats at other locations. Contact him with your requests.

We do ask that guests and shareholders respect this site and its primary function as a novitiate. Visits to the office and garden are made by appointment. Please call Fr. Maurice Lange, OMI for directions.

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## OEI CALENDAR

|                            |                                                                                     |
|----------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| January 4<br>Saturday      | <i>"Frost and Chill, Bless the Lord"</i><br>Winter Ecospirituality Retreat          |
| March 22<br>Saturday       | Spring Equinox Celebration, 4 PM;<br>followed by a potluck feast                    |
| April 26-27<br>Sat. - Sun. | <i>"New Life! New Life!"</i><br>Spring Ecospirituality Retreat                      |
| May 5-16<br>Weekdays       | <i>"Kids Explore the Sacred Universe"</i><br>Students immersed in the natural world |
| May 23-25                  | <i>"Revisioning the Vowed Life"</i><br>Retreats for those in Religious vows         |

Jan. 5, Feb. 2, Community Supported Garden  
Mar. 2, Apr. 6, Shareholder Meetings, 5 PM  
May 4 - Sundays

For more information, please call 618-466-5004