



La Vista Visions

A NEWSLETTER ON THE INTEGRITY OF CREATION

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Holy Ground

Where Catholic Tradition and the Universe Story Meet

(Reflections from an Ecozoic Retreat)

by Sr. Gail Worcelo, CP

Note: The term "Ecozoic," coined by Thomas Berry, means "house of life" and refers to the emerging life era when we humans will be present to the planet in a mutually enhancing manner. It calls for a relational shift challenging us to know and celebrate our place within the comprehensive context of this numinous universe as well as within our particular regions, continents, and blue-green planet.

Day 6

It is late evening and I am reflecting on a recent phone conversation with Thomas Berry in which he told me, "We are opening into a new age of Mary." I recall, too, a dream I had: the Black Madonna appeared to me in a field in her Christian manifestation as Our Lady of Czestachowa.

This image of Mary resides deep in my Polish roots. I have loved Our Lady of Czestachowa, the Black Madonna, all my life. For me, she announces the Mystery manifesting its radiance in flesh. She is Christ Bearer, matter impregnated with Spirit. She is woman of grace, accepting her own body as the chalice of the Spirit.

There is a beautiful icon of Our Lady of Czestachowa before me in our small monastery chapel. I placed the icon on the wall when we set up this space. At the same time I placed the photo of the Andromeda Galaxy there too. It was my attempt to visually situate the Tradition within the context of the universe story.

I find serenity in the Black Madonna and kneel before her now as I have done hundreds of times before in a receptive gesture of prayer. My back is bowed and my hands are open. This Madonna is deeply mysterious. I cannot penetrate the secret of her face. She embodies a divine calm, a concentrated self awareness. I am hungry for her guidance and wisdom; my eyes are teeth, and I receive her as a wafer in communion.

Many years ago a priest from Poland told me that the Black Madonna, most famously venerated in the Church at Jasna Gora, is really cosmic red. The painter's intuition was that as this Mary descended to us from the heavens she burned

through the atmosphere and darkened. She is dark from holding sacred fire in her matter. Yes, this Madonna gazes into the distance, far beyond where my own gaze will go. Her vision reaches from "end to end." In truth, her vision knows no end, spiraling into the unlimited reaches of the cosmos. *Her gaze demands a reinsertion back into the sacred community of life.*

The body of the Black Madonna has emerged from thirteen billion years of universe unfolding. She holds the memories of galaxies, stars, supernovas, and planets. She mirrors back to me the mysterious darkness that surrounds our solar system and the vast space into which our galaxy is expanding. In the deep curve of her body, often bent over the Christ Child in loving embrace, she reflects the great compassionate curve of the universe. In the center of her matter rests Divinity. Matter and spirit are one.

This Black Madonna of Czestachowa has long been worshipped as "The One Who Leads the Way." The radiance that shines through her darkness is in-

(continued on page 6)



Letter from the Director



Blessings of Winter from the Oblate Ecological Initiative!

The leaves this Autumn took their sweet time in falling, but they put on a dazzling show in early November. They have since indeed fallen to nourish the soil and new life in the year to come. We find ourselves now at a time and season in between, a time of darkness, coldness and restfulness. Much of the natural world now rests in the Northern Hemisphere at this time. How about us? What are we called to rest?

How might some “unproductive” time lead to new life and fresh perspective?

My friend Gail Worcelo invites us by prayerful example into such time. Her lead story situates part of our Christian tradition within the Universe Story. The new perspective resulting from this provides for an expanded consciousness of the Divine in our midst. How differently would we act if we really believed this? How then, is Christmas each day? How is Christ being born into all of matter and into each being?

Another friend, Diane White, shares her reflection on the emer-

Winter Solstice, 2007

gence of her ecological vocation. May her pondering and remembering and gratefulness evoke the same within us during these long nights of blessed darkness.

Our farm fields, resting under such darkness, are covered at times this Winter by a nourishing layer of snow. These soils have, in turn, nourished the shareholders of the *Community Supported Garden at La Vista* for five seasons. We are truly blessed to be able to respond to the call of entering into a mutually-enhancing relationship with this land.

The *La Vista Ecological Learning Center* celebrates the Winter Solstice here on December 22. Such a poignant time! Strangely this is typically the highest attended solstice or equinox celebration here on the bluffs. The shortest day and longest night of the year elicit a deep response from people in many places--maybe you can gather with folks on the Winter Solstice as well.

From the Solstice we rest to celebrate Christmas with our families and friends. We are thus renewed to begin an exciting year of programming with our “Blessed Darkness, Sacred Fire” retreat in early January. Please see our inserted calendar of events! We are also excited about our Lenten discussion series as well as our annual Earth Literacy program.

What might be an ecological resolution you can imagine for yourself in the New Year? What is Earth calling for at this time? We wish courage and creativity for you and the communities you are a part of! ☯

-Maurice Lange, OMI

Creating a Mutually Enhancing Human/ Earth Relationship

Green Gift-giving Ideas

The **ECOLOGICAL Calendar** is a lovely daily reminder to find balance by tuning in to the sacred rhythm of Earth's seasonal cycles. Composed of four beautifully illustrated panels, corresponding to the four astronomical seasons, each begins with either a solstice or equinox. It also illustrates a multitude of other natural annual phenomenon - moon phases, variation between tides, meteor showers, seasonal constellations, and the way animals adjust to the changing season. This would be a beneficial gift for those on the journey of weaving themselves deeply into the web of life. Information: www.ecologicalcalendar.info, 1-800-227-1428.

COME HERE TO THE BLUFFS! Explore the Calendar of Events included in this newsletter and give yourself a gift by registering for one or more of our offerings here at *La Vista Ecological Learning Center*. Double your gift and invite a friend to join you! Visit us at www.lavistaelc.org.

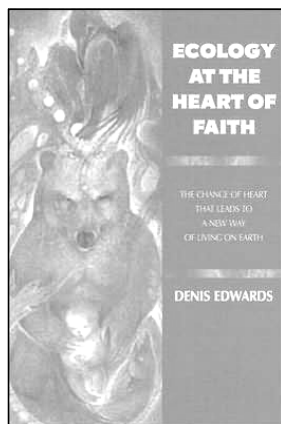
Winter Reading

Ecology at the Heart of Faith:

The Change of Heart That Leads to a New Way of Living on Earth

By Denis Edwards

Reviewed by Patrick Foley, TOR



In the reading and research that I have done in the area of ecological theology, two dangers are often mentioned in the dialogue between ecology and faith: the tendency to dismiss the Christian tradition as having nothing of value to contribute to conversations concerning nature, and the opposite tendency of applying aspects of the Christian tradition uncritically. In “Ecology at the Heart of Faith,” Denis Edwards, a theologian and professor from Australia, lays the groundwork for finding the middle path of critiquing the Christian tradition healthily and delving deeply into the core beliefs of the tradition in order to discover how ecological sensitivity can be found at the very heart of our faith. In a very accessible way, Edwards demonstrates convincingly how the Incarnation of Jesus and the experience of God as Trinity establish a firm foundation for an ecological theology/spirituality. Furthermore, this work is especially valuable be-

cause it focuses on how the Holy Spirit continues to hover over and groan in creation as a personal and transformative companion, continually leading all of creation on to the promised fulfillment.

Patrick Foley is a Franciscan Friar-Priest of the Third Order Regular (T.O.R.). He has authored and given presentations on a text entitled “A Covenant with Creation,” which outlines principles from scripture and tradition for forming an eco-spirituality. For more information, please contact him at patmax71@yahoo.com.

Martyr of the Amazon: the Life of Sister Dorothy Stang

By Roseanne Murphy, SNDdeN

Reviewed by Elizabeth Bowyer, SNDdeN

“This great love for the land which I have comes from my parents...My father always taught me that you had to work the land in such a way that when you finished, the land was richer than when you started...The land must live forever.”

These words were spoken by Sister Dorothy Stang, SNDdeN, the year before her murder in the Amazon Forest. Sister Roseanne Murphy, SNDdeN, has written Dorothy’s story in the recently published Martyr of the Amazon, the Life of Sister Dorothy Stang. The story begins in Dayton, Ohio, where Dorothy grew up in a large Catholic family. From there her journey moves to Phoenix, AZ, where, as a Sister of Notre Dame de Namur, she worked among the migrant Mexican farmers. “I wanted to work with those whose hands touched the soil.” In 1967 Dorothy’s congregation asked her to go to Brazil to work among landless families who were in a state of virtual slavery. In the 1980’s she moved with her people deeper into the Amazon Forest where the Brazilian government had offered plots of land for sustainable farming. From then on her story is one of working with the people to build solidarity in community and to preserve the forest through sustainable farming. Because she and her settlers stood in the way of powerful loggers and ranchers, greedy for agri-business land, Dorothy had to be removed. Her story is one of warmth, courage, and total focus on fostering justice for the poor and preserving the precious gift of the Amazon Forest. Sister Roseanne Murphy presents this modern martyr as a model of discipleship in today’s interconnected world.

Elizabeth Bowyer is a long time friend of Sister Dorothy Stang and twice served as her provincial. To inquire about Sr. Dorothy Stang educational materials, write to bowyer@sndden.org.



Coming Home

by Diane White

(tenth in the series on the **Emergence of an Ecological Vocation**)

Picking peaches, oh, how I hated that job! It was one of many hot summer mornings that my mother hauled all five of her children into the family station wagon and headed for the orchards to hand pick whatever fruit or vegetable was in season that week. After filling the back of the wagon with the peaches, we all piled back in the car for the hot sweaty, peach-fur-itching ride home. Once home, there was no rest. The big canning pot came out and we began par-boiling the peaches to slip the skins off. Then we pitted and sliced the fruit. After what seemed like an eternity, my mother excused me while she filled the jars and gave them a hot water bath to preserve them for the trip to the cellar, only to be brought to the table once the hot days of harvest were a memory. I remember eating them was a much more pleasant experience. In my childhood, there were many memories such as this, although most of them were not as sensuous.

The other facet of my childhood that stands out as important only in retrospect was how much I loved being outdoors, alone. I never thought of myself as a tomboy, but how I loved climbing trees and staying in them. My tree house was a wonderful spot. It consisted of only a flat piece of wood wedged into the arms of a buckeye tree, but it was my space. I could escape the noisy house filled with little brothers and sisters. I could read my books and feel the summer breezes blowing my hair, watching the leaves in the trees and the flowers in my mother's garden below me. It was my special time and space.

Fast-forward 25 years: I was married to a man who loved gardening and with whom I was running a greenhouse business. I was a mother of three. Yes, I was now the one canning and freezing fruits and vegetables when they were in season for healthy eating in the winter, although I must admit, I have never canned peaches! One June we had gone away to relax and have some boating fun with our little family on a camping vacation. I was tired because the spring season at the greenhouse had just ended. In an unexpected turn of events, I found myself with four hours alone for the first time in recent memory. It was a beautiful morning when the weather was perfect. The tall oak trees were swaying

in the breeze. The breeze itself felt like a soft hug from God as I lay in my chaise lounge alternating between watching the leaves blow and the sun sparkle on the lake with no responsibilities for the first time that I could remember. I sat and let the breeze and the leaves heal my overtired body and spirit. I did not know how much I had missed and needed quiet time in nature, but I haven't forgotten since that day. It is outdoors, in solitude, where God speaks to me and where I heal.

Fast-forward twenty-five years again: my children

were mostly grown, our greenhouse business was very successful and demanding in the extreme. My spiritual journey had become an integral part of my life, and I found myself wrestling with remaining in the Church I was born into and in which I raised my family. There was such a disconnect between what I knew in my heart about God and what the Catholic Church that I knew taught. I sometimes wondered if I could be true to myself and remain a member. But I believed in the importance of community worship, and I respected the width and depth of the Catholic tradition I have found in no other organized religion. Enter Fr. Maurice Lange and

the Oblates at the Novitiate in Godfrey, Illinois.

When I read in our parish Sunday bulletin of a Cosmology retreat to be given by Fr. Maurice and Fr. Bob Aaron on an early weekend in December 2001, I signed up. It seemed like a good time to spend a weekend apart before the craziness of the holidays descended. I also knew I liked being with Fr. Maurice. Other than that, I had no idea what the weekend held in store. I gathered my dear friend Ginny and we registered for the weekend. Little did I know that the weekend was to be a paradigm-shifting one for me.

The retreat began with beautiful music and Fr. Maurice sharing his deep love for Earth and a little bit about the weekend plans. To end the first evening, we went to chapel for a time of meditation and prayer. This is when I first began to realize that this wasn't just going to be an ordinary experience for me. In the center of the chapel was a heavy rope, in a huge spiral with stations along the way. It reminded me of a labyrinth. Okay, I thought, this is interesting, but what in the world is it?



Karen, Diane's daughter, enjoyed digging sassafras as a child. She is now a shareholder in the Community Supported Garden.

Then Fr. Maurice began explaining that this spiraling rope represented the time line of the history of the Universe, billions of years in the making. The stations represented important events in the evolution of the Universe. I could not believe my ears. Then he used the words which touched me deeply and allowed me to realize that I could remain a Catholic and an intelligent thinking woman also. He said that some scientists use the words "Big Bang" to describe the beginnings of the Universe, but that other thinkers prefer the term "Flaring Forth." He suggested that the candle burning at the very center of the spiral represented the love of God out of which creation has developed at a natural pace, from the beginning of space and time up to life today. After some prayer, more beautiful music, and quiet time, we were dismissed for the first evening. As Ginny and I headed to bed, questions swirled in my head. I had no idea that any part of the Church had embraced what had been my inner knowing for some time.

On Saturday morning Fr. Maurice shared about his time at Genesis Farm in Blairstown, New Jersey, where he served as an intern at its organic "community supported garden." It was the first time I had heard this term. He explained the details of membership, a sense of the community spirit created by working together to bring forth the fruit of the land, and the environmental benefits of eating organically and locally. Then he spoke of several Oblates wanting to create a community supported garden in Godfrey, on the grounds of the Novitiate at La Vista, and that he was waiting for permission from his Oblate superiors. I could tell that what the experience at Genesis Farm had been for *him*, this weekend was promising to be for *me*.

I was in the greenhouse business, producing flowers and vegetable plants for gardeners, but this language was foreign to me. There was a whole world of awareness that I had never touched, and it made so much sense. A change was happening within me that felt so right. "When the student is ready, the teacher will appear," were words that kept running through my mind. My inner being was jumping up and down agreeing with everything he was saying. I left on Sunday afternoon a changed person. I had found a segment of the Church I had not known existed: an intelligent and deeply spiritual group of men and women, dedicated to honoring the truth of God's magnificent creation of the Earth and caring for that creation.

So I began a journey - a journey of embracing and sharing the knowledge I had gleaned from my weekend. I began reaching for more knowledge and teachers who were of a similar mindset. I embraced a new passion for conserving, recycling, and living sustainably. Becoming a member of the Board of Directors for the Great Rivers Land

Trust stands out as a great privilege at this time in my life. This local land trust is dedicated to preserving the view of the Great River Road along the Mississippi and improving the quality of water that runs into the river.

I am also trying to influence my family and friends about the different ways we can conserve, re-use and buy locally. Recently, reading Animal, Vegetable, Miracle by Barbara Kingsolver brought me to an even deeper level of awareness of the value of eating locally and organically. It also nudged me to an increased awareness of composting and recycling.

It has been about six years now since that memorable retreat. I am blessed to call Fr. Maurice a dear friend at this stage in life. The *Community Supported Garden at La Vista* is alive and well, feeding 200 families locally grown produce in the summer, as well as sharing a portion of the produce with a local food pantry. How my husband Jim and I have enjoyed our relationship with the garden and the people who participate! Living sustainably has become important in these past years, even in the world at large. Fr. Maurice's mission often focuses on this important issue. What a blessing, and how glad I am that I listened to my spiritual nudging to get away for that weekend in December. It opened me to an awareness of how very important eating healthy and being in nature are to me, and this has been life giving to my spirituality. *It is like I came home to where my soul had lived all along.*

How very fortunate we are to have people such as Fr. Maurice Lange to open us spiritually and mentally in such vitally important matters. I bless and thank the Oblate order of priests for supporting this man and this mission. ☯



Jim and Diane White in their greenhouse



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*"We must be poor
with the poor
and recapture
a tender and kind
relationship with
Mother Earth.
Then we will know
how to act."*


-Sister Dorothy Stang, SNDdeN



Visit us at www.lavistaELC.org & www.lavistaCSA.org

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deed magnetic. She teaches me how to love my body and how to bring forth the Mystery embodied in my own flesh for the life of the world. Wherever the Black Madonna is found there is deep silence, there is solitude. I find myself pilgrimaging to places filled with her presence.

Praying before her in the stillness of this night I hear her say, "All matter is holy. Divinity is revealed in every being." 

(reprinted with permission of the author)

***Sister Gail Worcelo, CP,**
founded Green Mountain
Monastery under the guid-
ance of her mentor, Thomas
Berry, CP. Through the
founding of this monastery
dedicated to the healing
and protection of Earth and
its life systems, she hopes to
contribute to bringing the
Catholic tradition into its
cosmological phase.*



*Plan now to join us at La Vista
for a thought-provoking weekend retreat*

**Silent Spring:
Listening to the Voices of Extinction
Saturday, March 29, 10:00 am
through Sunday, March 30, midday**

Take advantage of this opportunity to:

- * Honor the wisdom of Rachel Carson
- * Explore the meaning of *species* and *extinction* with a local scientist
- * Reflect on the role of the human during this extinction spasm
- * Participate in a Council of All Beings

Overnight with meals: \$75.00 Commute with meals: \$55.00

To register, call 618-466-5004

Register early – last year's retreat was filled!

The Oblate Ecological Initiative
is a ministry of the
Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate.