

## **An Ecozoic Monastery: Shaping a Transforming Vision for the Future**

*By Sister Gail Worcelo, CP*

In 1994 I read a paper by Thomas Berry entitled, “Women Religious: Their Future Role.” It stated that in past centuries no religious community had been founded that was oriented toward protection of the Earth from the devastation that was beginning to be inflicted on the natural world through human agency. Such a community would have been unthinkable at that time. Now, however, there is hardly any religious or human activity that has prior claim to our concern. If a women’s religious congregation committed to the saving of the natural world was unthinkable in former centuries, it is now unthinkable that it does not exist!

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The invitation to begin such a community in the Church came as call and imperative to me. I had been studying with Thomas Berry since my novitiate in 1984 within the monastic community of the Passionist Nuns. By the time I arrived, the Passionist Congregation, founded by St. Paul of the Cross in the 1700’s, had undergone three major changes in the evolution of its own self-understanding.

It had moved from devotion to and remembrance of the Passion of Jesus to a recognition, beginning around the time of Vatican II, of the suffering Christ in the ‘Crucified of Today,’ those countless millions of unnamed ones undergoing the ravages of war, torture, violence, poverty and displacement.

Through the genius and deep intellectual probing of Thomas Berry, himself a Passionist, a further evolution in the understanding of the historical reality of the Passion began to take place in the early 1980s. The Passion of the Gospels and the Passion of the human began to be extended to the Passion of the Earth.

It is within this context that my formation took place. The pathos of our times had manifested itself in severe degradation of the planet, from simple physical assault, to disturbance of the chemical balance of the planet through petrochemical industries, to questionable manipulation of the genetic constitution of living beings, to the radioactive wasting of the planet through nuclear industries. It became clear to me that this was the place where Christ was suffering his present Passion.

To this end, Bernadette Bostwick and I have set about creating a new monastic religious community in the Church. Our “Ecozoic Monastery” is currently being founded in Vermont under the guidance and direction of Thomas Berry, CP, as a further extension of our originating charism. Presently, we have acquired a 190-acre plot of land and are preparing to move out of our house in the town of Weston to live on this land.

Why an “Ecozoic Monastery?” The word “Ecozoic” refers to the emerging period in the evolutionary process of Earth functioning. In this period, the human recognizes itself as a formidable presence on the planet and seeks ways of going into the future in a mutually enhancing manner with the rest of the community of life. Our Ecozoic Monastery will embrace those ancient monastic values of prayer, work, and community, which are at the service of the search for the Divine.

Its orientation will be towards the healing and protection of the Earth from further devastation by modeling ways which support a new pattern of human presence on the planet.

In these early beginnings, we imagine ourselves as missionaries to the bioregion and its life systems of water, air, and soil that must remain healthy if we are to survive. We imagine our monastery as a place of sanctuary for seeds, the new refugees of our time who need to be safeguarded from the fate of genetic manipulation. We imagine activating deep inner capacities still latent in our contemplative depths. We cherish the ability to open ourselves to a comprehensive compassion that is concerned for species thousands of years into the future in order to feel their vulnerability based on our actions now.

We begin this new monastery with the belief that when the full story of our origins and unfolding is comprehended in all its beauty by the human community, the energy released will set into motion the creativity of the human venture from a depth not hitherto suspected. When we humans realize that our ancestry included all forms of life, all the stars, the galaxies, even the fireball at the heart of time, then a spring of power will renew the face of the Earth.

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