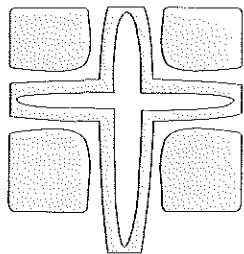


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Dear Sisters, Associates, and Friends,

Ecology comes from the Greek word *oikos*, which means "household." This issue treats our way of being in the world as our household, our sense of the earth-home as gift, our responsibility for sustaining it, with some spiritual and biblical resources that inspire our vision.

What is the logic of a women's religious community taking up, as Sisters of Mercy do, a special commitment to "act in harmony and interdependence with all creation"? There is a significant body of writing and banner for activism which links ecology and feminism, called "ecofeminism." As a frame for environmental concerns, ecofeminist theology focuses on the ancient metaphor of "mother earth." According to the poetic image which has served as muse for poets and dramatists throughout the history of western civilization, the earth is considered a representation of female identity, and human inhabitants represent maleness.

In the last couple of decades, theologians have recognized the transformative power of this earth-woman metaphor. For environmentalists, two kinds transformations are interlinked, one that is geo-centric and one that is anthropocentric. Greater consciousness of the dignity and worth of the earth will inevitably lead to improvement in the political and social status of women. Abuse of the earth's resources is the consequence of a sense of entitlement which "subjects" the earth to man's control. This same value system of "subjection" is mirrored in the secondary status of women's relation to men. By correspondence, improvement of women's lot is inevitable if sound environmental policies are implemented. When exploitation of earth's resources yield to policies of responsible collaboration, social policies which affect women will share in the shift of perspective.

If the theologians, psychologists, and sociologists are correct about the equation between treatment of the earth and status of women, then the environmental thrust of the Direction Statement is especially advantageous. If we dedicate our energy to seeking equality for women in church and society, we will become better environmentalists. As we become more effective ecologists, we will be engaged in changing the structures of power and domination so that women's lives flourish, along with the earth's resources.

By this logic, crushing cans is part of the effort to promote women's equality in church and society. At the moment, we need all the can-crushers we can recruit.



Sincerely,

Eloise Rosenblatt, R.S.M.

Eloise Rosenblatt, R.S.M.
Editor, The MAST Journal

The Cosmic Story

Christine Bucey Wilde

WHERE DO WE COME FROM? Why are we here? How are we related to others? These are some of our most fundamental questions and have been asked by humanity since the dawn of consciousness. This morning we will explore some answers as we relive the cosmic story.

[What followed was a reading of three primal creation myths: from the American Southwest in the Hopi tradition, from Australia in the very male-dominant Aboriginal tradition, and from Melanesia. A brief synopsis of the tales follows; for the text of each as well as more primal myths, the reader is referred to the book *Primal Myths* cited in the bibliography.]

Hopi: Originally there was only Taiowa and the first world of endless space existed in his mind. He then conceived part of himself as his nephew Sotuknang who arranged the nine-tiered world. Sotuknang in turn conceived Spider Woman who, with a mix of earth, saliva, and creative wisdom, made all living creatures.

Aranda (Australian Aborigine): This heavily male-centered myth tells the story of Karora who birthed all things both animal and human from his armpits in his sleep! He awakes to teach them how to hunt and dance and then falls asleep again

under the Earth for all time, dreaming.

Melanesian: In the charming story of Qat, Qat and his eleven brothers are born from a Mother Stone. Qat carefully carves men and women from wood and inspirits them with drums and dance. He also creates pigs who feature promi-

cousins. Living and non-living, we share a common beginning in the explosion of energies from which everything began.

So how do we tell *our* version of the story? We begin as do so many before us . . .

In the beginning . . .

The Originator brought forth a universe. A tiny seed. It

The Originator brought forth a universe. A tiny seed. It was so tiny that there was no outside. There was no time yet, nor space.

nently in this story! Originally the pigs walked like humans, but to avoid their embarrassment at being mistaken for human, Qat shortened their arms and legs so that they could walk on all fours. He also brought night and taught his brothers and creatures how to sleep since they complained so much that it was always light!

So why do we tell these stories? We tell them to find meaning, to, in the words of Swimme and Berry,¹ "enable us to become present to the larger Earth community in a mutually enhancing manner . . . We learn that we have a common genetic line of development." Each living creature is related; we are truly cosmic

was so tiny that there was no outside. There was no time yet nor space. At the moment of the Big Bang everything began. Time began. Space began to unfurl itself. All was energy. There was but One Force which was later to distinguish itself in four aspects as the universe cooled. Particles flashed in and out of existence and nothing was permanent except endless creativity. The laws which govern the interactions between particles were not yet established; the laws of physics had not yet congealed from the Chaos. Every instant was utterly fresh and new, its myriad possibilities realized and extinguished in the same moment. Everything in the universe existed in this fiery

maelstrom. At the root of the still oaks outside today are the unimaginable energies which had the power to fling a hundred billion galaxies into the night. And so it was . . . the great explosion of everything!

The first era of what Swimme and Berry called the "Flaring Forth"² ended when the universe cooled sufficiently to allow structure to emerge. The One Force began to manifest itself as four distinct aspects of force with set intensities. The values for these fundamental physical constants could certainly have been different. Had they been,

During this frenzy of creation, two types of matter were created: ordinary matter and antimatter. Ordinary matter, with which we are familiar, has positively charged protons and electrically neutral neutrons in its deep heart nucleus. Orbiting far away (relatively speaking) are the negatively charged electrons, the whole being held together by the attraction of opposite charges. Such is the matter of which you and I and the familiar world around us is composed. But there is another form of matter that was abundant in the beginning—antimatter. It

But there was a tiny bit more matter than antimatter. Although *why* is a question hotly debated among cosmologists, once again believing scientists see the hand of the Creator at work.

And this tiny excess of normal matter, quite literally, made all the difference in the universe. One second has passed.

The universe is steadily cooling, and the lower energy levels of this cooling universe could no longer create particles out of the void as they could during that amazing first second. So as the matter-antimatter battle raged on and annihilations continued, the number of particles dropped steadily. At the end of this titanic battle, only one-billionth of the original matter in the universe remained—and we are it. The universe we see today is that tiny fragment of leftovers! Those particles which had survived could now endure.

Within the first three minutes, these now stable particles could begin to enter into bonded, enduring relationships. A proton and an electron could become a stable hydrogen atom; two protons, two neutrons and two electrons could arrange themselves into a stable helium atom. The first stable matter of the universe made its appearance. These light elements are essential for synthesizing the heavier elements of which life (and non-life for that matter) are composed. If the early parameters had been different,

**In the beginning matter and antimatter
were locked in a titanic battle for
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no surviving universe.**

life may never have emerged. So why *this* structure rather than some other, equally plausible one? Scientists debate the matter fiercely; believer scientists see the gentle touch of Guiding Creator. In this second era, the "fundamental architecture"³ was set for all time. The maximum size of a dinosaur or a star, the grip of a lion's jaws, the height of volcanoes on Earth or Mars are all set by the magnitudes of the electromagnetic and gravitational forces, and these parameters were set very early on. Had it been otherwise, the immense richness of the life we experience today would have been closed off.

would look like ordinary matter were you to see it, but all the charges are opposite. The important thing is that when a particle of matter touches a particle of antimatter the result is dramatic: total annihilation of both as the particles are converted into a shower of energy! Although there is virtually no naturally occurring antimatter today (certainly no large-scale objects made of it!) That was not true in the beginning. In the beginning matter and antimatter were locked in a titanic battle for existence. Had there been equal quantities of each, there would have been no surviving universe.

the infant universe might have made heavier elements instead, and if life emerged at all, it certainly would have been drastically different. With the appearance of these stable atoms, photons of light energy could finally pass through matter without being absorbed by an energetic soup of particles. The universe suddenly became transparent.

Matter, however, was dark, and space ever expanding. The light which was now free to travel moved at a fixed speed as it does today. Light is fast, but not infinitely fast. In the vastness of space, light travels at 300,000,000 meters/second (or 186,000 miles/second for those of you not fully "metricated" yet!). This means, for instance, that light leaving our Sun takes about eight minutes to reach Earth. So we see the Sun not as it is at this instant, but as it was when the light left the Sun eight minutes ago. If the Sun were suddenly to be ripped out of the cosmos, we would have no clue—for eight minutes at least! This also means that the farther away an object is in space, the longer it takes that light to reach us. Alpha Centauri, the nearest star to us other than our own Sun, is 4.2 light years away. (A light year is the distance that light can travel in one year—about six trillion miles.) This means that light must travel for 4.2 years to reach us from that star. So if you could see that star tonight, you would see it as it appeared 4.2 years ago

when the light left its surface. So, the farther out in space we look, the farther back in time we look as well. We believe the universe is about 13–15 billion years old. Just recently, a galaxy was observed at 13 billion light years away; what we are seeing are events from very near the moment of creation!

If that was all there was to the story, the universe would be an expanding collection of energy and light, dark gases. But it is not. So where did the

particle of matter everywhere in the universe attracts every other particle into a bonded relationship. And one more thing—gravity never quits.

So, in the beginning, there were tiny fluctuations and irregularities in the fireball. Why? Another question to drive heated cosmological arguments into the wee hours! I see it as the fingers of a creative God playing over the surface of her creation. The slightly denser parts felt a

We are, all of us, enmeshed in an
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other 90 naturally occurring elements come from? That is a story about gathering, birth, stability, and death.

One of the four faces of the One Force is a force we call gravity, and it is the ground of the next part of our story. We still do not know why there is gravity, although we can describe it and mathematize it well. We accept it as a property of matter, that is to say that all matter possesses it. This is a crucial point: every bit of matter, no matter how small, attracts every other bit of matter. *Gravity only gathers.* Gravity never, *ever* repels. Although it weakens with distance, it never drops to zero. We are, all of us, enmeshed in an inescapable web of ingathering. Every

stronger gravitational attraction and began to coalesce into vast clouds, swirling about their centers, endlessly infalling. These would give rise eventually to the vast families of star systems we call galaxies. Our own galaxy, the Milky Way, has at least one hundred billion suns in it.

We also now believe that at the heart of most (if not all) galaxies is a roaring heart of darkness which astronomers call a *black hole*. This rupture in the fabric of space-time causes the matter around it to fall into its voracious maw. This infalling matter is shredded, giving out intense energy as its final song. This destruction causes waves of high density to ripple through the galaxy,

shocking parts of the gas cloud into clumps which will become stars—and perhaps support life-giving planets. There is no life without death—no blossoming without annihilation.

These clumps in the galaxy were also compressed in the inexorable hands of gravity. As a ball of gas is compressed, however, something else happens. Its temperature rises. When that internal temperature reaches a critical minimum of about twenty million degrees Celsius, something quite remarkable happens. Hydrogen nuclei slam

burst once again into brilliance—100 billion galaxies containing 100–400 billion suns blazing in the darkness.

Every star in the night sky is a sun more or less like our own. Although some are larger and brighter, some smaller and cooler, the process which fuels them is the same. But stars, too, have life cycles. After its birth, a star settles into its mature stage in which it is delicately poised between two massive forces: the nuclear energy pressing outward trying to blow the star up, and the fist of gravity trying to crush the star out of existence. Our own

to crush the core further. But compressing gases raises their temperature, and suddenly new elements can be produced . . . carbon, nitrogen, oxygen, and others. The new higher temperature causes the star to expand, temporarily beating back gravity. But expanding gases cool, and cooler gases cannot resist the ingathering of gravity. Locked in a cosmic battle, our sun will begin to pulsate, each pulsation becoming more drastic than the last, and fatally altering our climate. Finally, in one great outward expansion, our sun will swell to a huge, cool, reddish star called a Red Giant. But as the edge of the Sun races toward us, our atmosphere will be blown away, our oceans boil away, and the solid Earth will be burned into cinders. The edge of this dying Sun will kiss the orbit of Mars, and what is left of Earth will be *inside* the Sun.

But cool stars like this don't have the intense nuclear fires pressing outward which can stand up to gravity. Slowly at first and then ever more rapidly, gravity will collapse our Sun down to an extremely dense object the size of the Earth. This fiercely hot object is called a White Dwarf and has such high core temperatures that all the chemical elements up to iron can be produced in its fiery heart by thermonuclear fusion. As it runs out of fuel one last time, this dying star will slowly cool until it is a dead, lightless lump in space, its outer planets robbed of their source of energy.

Our sun is delicately poised between two massive forces: the nuclear energy pressing outward trying to blow it up, and the fist of gravity trying to crush it.

into each other with such force that their normal repulsion is overcome. They approach so closely that another aspect of the One Force is manifested—the Strong Nuclear Force, which binds them together into a new and heavier nucleus called helium. In this process, some matter is converted into pure energy. This is the energy of the stars, pouring out into space. This process is called thermonuclear fusion. At this moment, a star is born, converting its very matter into energy, radiating its essence away into the vast cosmic night. At this point in the story, the universe which had been dark for 100,000 years

sun has been poised on this knife edge for 4.5 billion years, and will likely remain so for another 4 billion years or so. At which time there will be a last perfect day on Earth.

To understand where we come from, we must understand star death. So let us follow our own Sun through its dying. Several crises occur to upset the fragile balance between those two great titanic forces, but the biggest crisis occurs when about 40 percent of the Sun's core hydrogen has been converted into helium. The fuel is running critically low, and the nuclear fires begin to cool. Gravity, ever patient, seizes the opportunity

But if that is all that stars did, we would not be here, for the elements needed to make the astonishing variety of living things would be locked in the heart of a cold, dead star. It is the larger stars whose deaths seed the possibilities of life into the cosmos, for they experience something unparalleled since the Big Bang. As they start to collapse during the unstable phase, the internal pressures become so great that the star explodes, flinging its outer layers into the vast cosmic night. We call this a nova, or a supernova for the largest and most spectacular explosions. What is crucial for us, however, is the realization that it is *only in this event* that all the elements heavier than iron are produced, and then flung outwards to be the seeds of a new generation of stars. If you are wearing any gold or silver right now, touch it. Realize that the *only* place that those atoms can be produced are in the death explosions of the great stars. This is cosmic recycling on the grandest of scales, and these elements are essential to make the variety of life and non-life we see around us. Only the stars which blast themselves into the night can give rise to new life.

Our sun is made of just such recycled "star stuff," in fact, it is now thought to be a third generation star. In its infancy, the Sun was an immense cloud of gases—mostly primordial hydrogen, but all of the other elements as well, thanks to the spectacular

deaths of the great stars. Gravity, working slowly at first, then ever more swiftly, inexorably gathered this cool, dark cloud of atoms together. Most of the matter was compacted into a lump, but the leftovers circled this dark, young infant in a disk. Lumps within that disk also began to compact under the hand of gravity, forming the planets and their moons, the asteroids and comets—all the members of the Sun's gravitational family.

The most awesome realization is this:
every atom in Earth, except for primordial
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explosions of the great stars somewhere
in the galaxy. *We are star stuff!*

When the internal temperatures reached the critical point, the sun flared forth into brilliance, and the lighter elements were driven far into the night, riding the firestorm of newly released nuclear energy. The heavier elements stayed close to home, forming the planets Mercury, Venus, Earth, and Mars. The lighter elements were blown farther away, forming the gas giants of Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, and Neptune. The most awesome realization is this: every atom in Earth, except for primordial hydrogen, was produced in the death explosions of the great stars somewhere in the galaxy. *We are star stuff!* In literal truth, you are a child of the universe.

Earth was originally hot and mushy. Heavier elements, the gift of the stars, sank toward the core, while the lighter elements drifted upward, forming the crust. As Earth cooled and solidified, early volcanoes blasted gases of all sorts into the sky, including water vapor. Eventually the Earth cooled sufficiently that the water vapor could condense and begin to rain down to fill the basins of the lakes and seas. But this early

atmosphere was a poisonous brew of ammonia, nitrogen, and methane. Frequent lightning sparked the brew into simple organic molecules needed to make DNA and amino acids—and allow life to emerge from mindlessness. Imagine the joy of God watching this unfolding whose seeds lay ten billion years in the cosmic past!

One billion years of Earth history have passed. The first, primal cells called prokaryotes have emerged, organizing themselves and developing the remarkable ability to encode information for the future—how to make copies of themselves. Life learned to perpetuate itself. They developed chemicals with the

ability to absorb photons of light to power their internal processes. And, like all life, they made waste products. A new crisis lurked in the joy of unfolding life. Their waste products excreted into the sky would transform the atmosphere, eventually making their sort of life impossible under the new conditions. That waste product was oxygen. In time, their own wastes set them ablaze on an internal funeral pyre.

But life is nothing if not resilient, and from the ashes of the old, arose a new generation of living beings: the eukaryotes. These cells thrived

dangerous margins, pushing the limits for tolerance for new conditions. The amphibians and land-dwelling organisms emerged, took hold, and proliferated in bewildering variety.

But violence has often rocked the cradle of life. Sixty-five million years ago Earth suffered the latest cosmic intruder. A comet crashed into Earth off the coast of what is today the Yucatan peninsula, drastically altering climate and wiping out 90 percent of the species on Earth. The dinosaurs are the most famous casualties of that mass extinction. In the void left by

By the time the earliest protohumans emerged, virtually all of Earth's history had passed.

in the new oxygen-rich environment, using the dangerous power of oxygen for life. These cells invented sex, developing the ability to unite genetically disparate individuals to make a new being. They also invented eating other beings as a way of obtaining the nutrients they needed. From them emerged the first communities: the multicellular organisms. At this point in the story, some 80 percent of Earth's history has passed.

Six hundred million years ago, the multicellulars arose in astonishing variety in the ancient oceans. Slowly, life learned to live in the

the demise of the dinosaurs, mammals seized dominance. Mammals, with their more highly developed nervous systems, developed the gifts of emotion, a sense of self and other, compassion, and the awesome capability for consciousness.

By the time the earliest protohumans emerged, virtually all of Earth's history had passed. Swimme and Berry have a wonderful synopsis of the progression of events from this point.⁴ In summary, it goes like this:

- 4 million years ago, in Africa, protohumans stood on only two limbs.

- 2 million years ago, they began using their free hands to fashion tools.
- 35,000 years ago, they celebrated their existence in cave-paintings.
- 20,000 years ago, they recorded their awareness of the seasons and cycles and natural rhythms.
- 12,000 years ago, they shaped the patterns of the seasons by domesticating plants and animals: wheat, barley, and goats in the Middle East, rice and pigs in Asia, and corn, beans, and the alpaca in the Americas. A secure food supply allowed populations to surge, and Neolithic villages emerged with their settled life styles. Shrines to the Great Mother began to replace the totemic worship of animals.
- 10,000 to 5,000 years ago, humans established their basic cultural patterns in language, religion, the arts, music, and dance.
- 5,000 years ago, humans learned to write, and invented bureaucracy and hierarchical relationships. We began to make the use of natural processes and resources—big business. As populations soared, military establishments arose to protect these varied interests, and warring, largely male deities arose, supplanting images of the Great Mother.
- 2,000 to 1,000 years ago, the great universalist re-

ligions of Buddhism, Christianity and Islam emerged.

- 500 years ago, the massive European expansion began. But unlike humanity's earlier expansions out of Africa and across the Bering Strait into the Americas, Europeans found humans wherever they went—and subjugated them.
- From then to the present, we see the rise of the nation-state, democracy, the Industrial Revolution, and finally powerful institutions which span nations: the multinational corporations.

As human populations have soared into the billions, we are again changing the Earth: her air, her waters, and her beautiful stony face.

So where does the cosmic story go from here? Will the universe continue to expand forever? Or, if there is sufficient matter clutched in gravity's relentless grasp, will it eventually halt its outward race and come together in one final, cataclysmic ingathering? We simply don't know. But at the human level, our future must be worked out in the tension between the use and exploitation of Earth's resources and our desperate need to preserve the well-being of the entire Earth community.



Notes:

[This presentation was originally given at a conference retreat, "The Earth Pleads for Mercy," at Mercy Center in Burlingame, California, July 30–August 3, 1997.]

1. Swimme, Brian and Thomas Berry. *The Universe Story*, p. 3–5.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 11–15.

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We Have Sinned Against Creation

Marilyn King, R.S.M.

I DID NOT WANT TO WRITE this article. Originally, when the idea for it was posed as part of a series on eco-spirituality, I offered to develop the topic of the devastation we humans have wreaked on the environment. It was a necessary part of the picture, and no one else on the planning committee wanted to take this segment.

this article which would be full of sobering information, I chose to see the assignment through, motivated by our Direction Statement's urging us to "act in harmony and interdependence with all creation." If we as an Institute are committed to address the ecological question, we must admit that we have sinned against creation.

economic growth and national power, so deeply embedded in the psyche of industrialized nations, brushed off these voices as either fanatic, ignorant, or just too threatening to hear. This attitude toward the prophets is far from gone.

However, the earth is speaking to us. As Bishop Anthony Pilla of Cleveland observed, "When the beauty and balance within creation is not treated with respect, the universe in sense talks back to us, demanding our attention and response."¹ And she is saying that our treatment of her, especially in this century, is putting into question, for the first time in history, the survival of the human species. This impending tragedy is due, not to natural forces, but to human choices. The glory of human achievement has become the desolation of the earth. The desolation of the earth has become the destiny of humanity.

We are in the most transformative period of human history. In evolutionary terms, we are at the end of the cenozoic era, the span of sixty-five million years characterized by the development of mammals. This is the era in which the earth as we experience it, with the beauty of plants and the variety of animals, blossomed. All this splendor has been given to us as a one-time

The earth is speaking to us and she is saying that our treatment of her is putting into question the survival of the human species.

I dutifully began to read and take notes and think about the issue. I was not far into this research phase when I began to feel depressed and overwhelmed by the enormity of the destruction that is happening daily to our world. I was gathering much information and the news was not good. I found myself feeling a little like the German citizens who lived near enough to the death camps to see the smoke from the ovens, but knew subconsciously not to go any further in searching out the reasons for the fires.

Despite this personal aversion to expending the energy needed to think through

Admittedly, the ecological question of sustainability came upon us suddenly and with unprecedented speed. I remember learning about the "water cycle" in high school science in the 1960s, but the notion that there could come a time when that water cycle could no longer be sustained because of human intervention was something I was not taught, and I certainly didn't think of it on my own. The ecological crisis found us little prepared to understand the dynamics of complex, interactive systems and the force of exponential growth. There were a few prophetic voices, but technological optimism,

endowment and it is in danger of vanishing forever. Some parts have already gone. It is up to us to make the transition to renewed life or to total destruction.

The decision to save the earth is urgent. To personalize this urgency, picture some pre-school child you know. The life expectancy of this child is roughly seventy-five years. The resources of the earth which we use for our present standard of living are expected to run out in about sixty years at our present rate of consumption and waste. The consequences for this child are frightening. What can we do to save this child? To change this rate of consumption of our world's resources requires decisions to be made in the next twenty years. We are the ones to make those decisions.

Other than the complexity of the issue and the enormity of the problem, a major block to stopping the extermination of life on our planet is the denial most of us are engaged in so that we may cope with the reality. Thomas Berry writes:

We are unable to move from a conviction that as humans, we are the glory and crown of the Earth community to a realization that we are the most destructive and the most dangerous component of that community. Such denial is the first attitude of persons grasped by any form of addiction.²

Berry goes on to say that what is happening to us is a massive engagement in displacement

activities which help us escape from the horror of the truth. Thus, the rise in violence, racism, hedonism—projections onto others of this shadow which hovers over us.

There are ways of moving through this time of transformation with hope, however. Joanna Macy, writing in the 1980's during the period of growing consciousness of the nuclear threat, stresses the importance of admitting and expressing the enormous feel-

vironmentally destructive behavior, most of us could immediately name many of the principal crises striking the natural resources of our planet: pollution of our air and water, global warming and destruction of the ozone layer, loss of top-soil, endangerment of plant and animal species, destruction of the rain forests—to name a few. Perhaps some of us could even expand on these issues with some statistics. For example:⁴

A major block to stopping the extermination of life on our planet is the denial most of us are engaged in so that we may cope with the reality.

ings of fear, rage, guilt, sorrow, and despair that the global threat spawns. Because there are such strong social taboos against expression of these feelings, they are largely repressed. This leads to paralysis, a sense of isolation, and powerlessness. To counteract this, she advocates that people come together to help each other process the information and the feelings connected with the facts. In her experience, when this pain is admitted and processed, there comes a release of the energy which is needed to move beyond the pain and paralysis.³

What Are the Environmental Crises?

Despite all our denial mechanisms vis-à-vis our current en-

- Potable water. Only 3 percent of the earth's water is fresh and three-quarters of this is frozen. Over the past three hundred years, global water withdrawal has grown more than thirty-five-fold and is increasing. If the world's population reaches ten billion by 2070, there will be no more potable water.
- Global warming. Because of the volume of emissions of heat from the vastly increased energy use of the industrialized nations, the average temperature of the earth is rising. This is causing the polar caps to melt and the seas to rise. Some Pacific Island nations have already been obliterated.

- Loss of top-soil. Since World War II, an area larger than India and China combined, 11 percent of the earth's vegetated surface, has been degraded because of the loss of top-soil. It takes a thousand years to replace one inch of it. In the not too distant future, the growing loss of topsoil and the concurrent growth of human population will reach a point of intersection and there simply will not be enough land to grow the food needed for life. Ironically, much of the top-soil is eroding because of increased cattle grazing to satisfy our addiction to meat.

When we destroy anything in creation, we are diminishing modes of the divine presence in our midst.

- Destruction of the rain-forests. Each day, 216 square miles of tropical rain-forests are lost, two acres every second. Each year, acreage equal to that of California and Florida combined is destroyed. These rain-forests are the lungs of the planet. They regulate climate and the oxygen/carbon dioxide cycle which allows life to flourish. They are also home to a great variety of species of animals and

plants, which are sources of food, medicine, shelter, and spiritual inspiration. But these precious lands are being cleared for agriculture, cattle grazing, and logging. They are being sold to pay national debts. In Papua, New Guinea, forests are being used to supply cardboard packaging for Japanese electronic products.

- Vanishing species. Of all the existing species of plants, animals and micro-organisms, we know "only" about 1,600,000 of them. For the past six million years, we lost no more than ten species a year. Today we are losing about 10,000

each year, five an hour. This is due primarily to disappearing habitats. From 1975 to 2000, it is estimated that 20 percent of all living species will have become extinct. We seem to be acting out the anguished cry of the prophet Hosea:

There is no fidelity, no mercy; no knowledge of God in the land . . . Therefore, the land mourns, and everything that dwells in it languishes; the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and

even the fish in the sea perish.⁵

As appalling as these statistics are, perhaps the most tragic victim of all is our human spirit. As we destroy the treasure of nature, we are simultaneously desiccating our souls. Thomas Berry writes:

As the natural world recedes in its diversity and abundance, so the human finds itself impoverished in its economic resources, in its imaginative powers, in its human sensitivities, and in significant aspects of its intellectual intuitions.⁶

The deprivation of the great variety of animals and plants shrinks our opportunities to appreciate beauty, to study the intricacies and wonders of nature, and to contemplate and praise the creator. When we destroy anything in creation, we are diminishing modes of the divine presence in our midst. The United States Bishops point out in their document, "Renewing the Earth":

Our mistreatment of the natural world diminishes our own dignity and sacredness, not only because we are destroying resources that future generations of humans need, but because we are engaging in actions that contradict what it means to be human.⁷

If the wonders of the universe bring us spiritual exhilaration and aesthetic pleasure, exploitation of the universe breeds dissatisfaction and emptiness. One of the most precious loci of the divine presence is in the poor ones of our human family. Sadly, it is the poor

who suffer most from the environmental crisis because it is their land which is being stripped; it is their towns which are toxic dumps; it is their water which cannot be cleansed of poisonous chemicals. Further, it is the poor who suffer more, even at attempts to remedy the crisis because it is their jobs that are affected and their subsistence from the land which is threatened.

What Has Caused This Crisis Situation?

The complexity and magnitude of the environmental crisis does not lend itself to easy explanations of its causes. Further, an investigation into one cause raises the question of the cause of *that* cause. Still, it is crucial to ask the question, "Why?" if steps are to be taken to reverse the patterns which are causing such global devastation.

Just as many of us are aware of the various environmental catastrophes around us, many of us can name the external causes. The burning of fossil fuels emits dangerous levels of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. Chloro-fluorocarbons in coolants are responsible for the puncture in the ozone layer. Wide use of herbicides and insecticides has poisoned our waters. Dumping of toxic and nuclear waste has rendered land uninhabitable and poor neighborhoods deadly. Over-fishing has depleted our waters of marine life. Unrestrained logging is destroying our forests. Cya-

nide fishing, harbor dredging, coral mining and agricultural runoff are putting almost three-quarters of our coral reefs in peril. Unjust land distribution leads to clearing of more land or overuse of the same land. The negative impact of war on soil, water, and crops, not to speak of the loss of human life, is tremendous.

Many of the causes for the disruption of the ecological balance of nature are intri-

life and what it can't find in its own bio-region. For example, if I want coffee in the morning and steak at night and strawberries in winter, I probably need to take these commodities out of someone else's bio-region. If I have the money to pay for these and if "they" need my money badly enough, then my tastes can be satisfied. But, of course, I need someone to package and transport these foods and that assumes

The present world economy is not bio-regionally based. This means that one bio-region takes from another what it thinks it needs for a full life and what it can't find in its own bio-region.

cately inter-related. Bioregionalism illustrates this interrelatedness well. The simplest definition of a bio-region is the immediate place where we live. Every bio-region is a self-contained nurturing matrix which provides all, or nearly all, of what each organism in that region needs to sustain life. In the natural cycle of life and death, the various parts of the bio-region live off of and for the benefit of each other. In a well-functioning bio-region, resources are sustained because they are used only to the extent that any resource maintains its capacity to regenerate itself.

The present world economy is not bio-regionally based. This means that one bio-region takes from another what it thinks it needs for a full

that roads must be built and airplanes be built. That means more fuel emissions and resulting pollution, not to mention the fact that some bird habitats are endangered because super-highways are too wide for their range of flight to cross. It is likely, too, that the bio-region which supplies these foods moves into one-crop planting, since this is often their primary source of income. But one-crop planting cannot be sustained because in nature everything is made to flourish in diversity and differentiation so as to build an interdependent ecosystem.

This above scenario is but a vignette of what is, in fact, the trading practice of the majority of the world. These practices are neither ecologically sound nor sustainable.

They have led to a monumental neglect of the world's poor and terrible environmental disorder which cannot be attended to because of the crushing debts this economy puts on poor countries.

There is one other external cause for our present environmental crisis that should be addressed here. It is the rate of population growth. Paul VI recognized this facet of the issue when he wrote:

It is true that too frequently an accelerated demographic increase adds its own difficulties to the problems of development; the size of population increases more rapidly than the available resources.⁸

There is a variety of approaches to this question. Immediately, anyone whose conscience has been formed in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, or any religious tradition for that matter, will cite human selfishness as a major motivation for choices which satisfy personal needs and wants at the expense of others. Bishop Michael Pfeifer puts this reason in one of his recent teachings:

We recognize the roots of environmental destruction lie in human pride, greed, and selfishness, as well as the appeal of the short term over the long term.⁹

This greed seems more apparent in nations and people

us to a situation of grave injustice. "It is manifestly unjust that a privileged few should continue to accumulate excess goods, squandering available resources, while masses of people are living in conditions of misery at the very lowest level of subsistence."¹⁰

The industrial nations (one-quarter of the world's population) consume three-quarters of the energy and produce 90 percent of the hazardous wastes of the planet. These statistics are commonly quoted. If we know and even anguish over these facts, why does the situation seem to be getting worse and no steps are being taken to reverse the trend? Thomas Berry believes it is because we richer nations have become addicted to "progress." He writes: "The terminal phase of the Cenozoic [era] was caused by a distorted aspect of the myth of progress."¹¹ During this past century, we humans have taken extensive control over the earth with little regard for the integral dynamics of the workings of nature. At first, these developments in technology did make our lives easier at little expense to natural resources. But very quickly our life-styles got used to new yearly models with all their improvements. Our entire economic system based itself not on sustainable living but on regarding the resources of the earth as a commodity to be used at our pleasure. And we just got used to this unlimited "progress," to the point of addiction. Like the addict, we

During this past century, we humans have taken extensive control over the earth with little regard for the integral dynamics of the workings of nature.

Leaving aside the moral question of family planning, the fact is that at the present rate of population growth and consumption patterns, the planet will not be able to sustain the projected world population sixty years from now.

Rather than listing more of these external causes for the current planetary crisis, let us probe one layer deeper. Why would our species engage in habits and devise policies and build machines which are so destructive of the very life we seek to improve? Isn't that unnatural? Every other part of nature seems to know better.

who are affluent. In the United States, for example, the birth of a baby imposes a projected stress on the environment which is one hundred times that of a baby born in Bangladesh. American babies grow up to own cars, use air-conditioning, eat beef, and acquire any new technology which will replace the outdated. The Bangladesh baby will probably live as frugally at age fifty as at birth, if he/she lives that long. When looked at this way, it is not over-population that is the fundamental problem, so much as wanting more. This greed has brought

know this isn't good for us in the long run, but we just can't change our behavior.

What Has Allowed This Addiction to Take Over?

We move one level deeper. If one of the main causes for our hazardous practices is an addiction to consumerism which feeds off a deep self-centeredness, then the question arises: "Why has this addictive behavior surfaced at this time in history?"

We are Distant from Nature

An initial answer to this question related to one of the consequences of a way of life which is surrounded and supported by the products of modern day industry. Most of us live at a distance from nature. Most of us live in an artificial world, thanks to technology. Most of us couldn't say what phase the moon is in today, when is the best time to plant corn, what are the names of the birds that are native to our bio-region, what time the sun sets in mid-May, where our water comes from and where it goes, or where any of our waste goes.

I live in the country and when I drive to work each day I pass about ten dead animals along the road, some of which I have killed. At least, I can see the lethal effects of our machinery. But how many of us can cry over all the animals that are killed on the roads

when we don't even see them? If we don't know where our water supply comes from, how can we be concerned on a daily basis about its growing scarcity? We protect what we love. In fact, it is only the energy of love which is powerful enough to release us from the grasp of a destructive addiction. But we must know what we love and that is where we are deprived.

From the time that humans began to live in cities, particularly from the time of the industrial era, we have separated ourselves from nature. As urban dwellers and jet commuters, we have grown estranged from the natural scale and rhythms of life on Earth. For that reason, the environmental crisis is still invisible to most of us. Because we don't even recognize the natural forms of life around us, we blithely engage in destroying them. Because we do not communicate with nature, we are not aware of nature's limits. We cannot hear the ways nature is telling us that it cannot much longer meet our demands or face our impacts. Because we just go to the store and buy what we believe to be our daily needs, we don't know how exploitative our clothing is, how non-sustainable our diet is, how destructive our household items are both to nature and to many of those who produce these goods.

Brian Swimme, in his video "The Hidden Heart of the Cosmos," offers some wonderful antidotes to this distancing from nature. He invites his viewers to *feel* the solar

system, to *experience* the rotations of the planet.¹² I truly believe that once we reconnect with nature, either through star-gazing or growing plants or having a pet, we will easily regenerate that sense of interdependence with all of creation. This may be one of our early steps on the road to recovery.

We Are Influenced by Our Judaeo-Christian Tradition

In her presidential address to the Catholic Theological Society of America in 1997, Elizabeth Johnson began by stating, "As the twenty-first century rapidly approaches, there is a vital theme largely absent from the thinking of most North American theologians, namely, the whole world as God's good creation."¹³ Theologians of the Judaeo-Christian tradition consistently emphasize that our God is both immanent and transcendent. Still, by and large, ordinary believers and theologians alike still think that God is "up" more than within, at least not within all of creation. We fail to see that through Jesus the universe experienced in consciousness the fact that it was an incarnation of God.

We say we believe in the incarnation, but it doesn't seem to translate into our worship or moral consciousness or our theological investigations. For example, in our worship, we rarely pay heed to the planets, or the top-soil, or our kinship with the animals. What

conscience formation has helped us make decisions about recycling or use of the automobile? Where is the church's response to biocide and geocide? How many theologians know the scientific story of the universe?

While it is true that our scriptures open with the magnificent account of the creation of the world, this story has been interpreted anthropocentrically. Human beings are the pinnacle of creation, in separation from the rest of God's creatures which humans subject by naming. But what makes us the top of the heap?

underpinnings have left us with a weak response to our environmental crisis and have provided us with little spiritual encouragement or magisterial backing to help us move out of our current behaviors.

We Are Heirs of the Enlightenment

For the greater part of the history of the human race, human beings viewed themselves as part of the universe. The Chinese, for example, defined the human being as *hsin*, the heart of the universe. They saw humankind as integrated

Our theological underpinnings have left us with a weak response to our environmental crisis and have provided us with little spiritual encouragement to help us move out of our current behaviors.

When it comes to reflexive consciousness, we are. But when it comes to swimming, the fish are best. None of God's creatures are absolutely at the top. Only God is. But our tradition has led us to believe that God's command to "have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and all the living things that move on the earth" means that all creation is made for our use. Certainly, this is a distortion of our tradition, but the patriarchal matrix in which this tradition was formulated and interpreted left its imprint of domination and subjection. Thus, our theological

with everything that exists. Even medieval scholasticism linked up theology and cosmology so that the number of the sacraments were matched to the number of the then-known heavenly bodies. In fact, this relation of science and faith was so interwoven that when Copernicus announced that the sun, not the earth, was at the center of the universe in the sixteenth century, the church officials could not transform their theological constructs fast enough to accommodate this major new piece of information and chose rather to part ways with science.

This separation of science and religion was a serious misstep for the life of the earth. Bolstered by the dualism of Descartes in which all reality is separated into ego and not-ego, subject and object, science developed a mechanistic view of the universe. The natural world became solely a resource for human utilization. Progress was measured by the extent of human control over the non-human world for the benefit of humans. Add to this mix Darwin's theory of the survival of the fittest, and it became "natural" to do anything necessary for one's own good, even at the expense of "lower" nature.

Thus, consumerism had a basis in scripture, theology, and reason. But it is a misguided foundation. We are stewards of the earth, not masters. Even technology cannot transcend the basic biological law of limits: every species is limited by an opposing species or environmental condition so that one cannot overwhelm the other. Even if technology brings us to the utter depletion of Earth's resources, the earth will, in turn, terminate human life. There is no such thing as an ever-expanding human economy which depends on financing from the earth.

Where Is the Sin?

So far, we have named the various environmental crises, examined their immediate underlying causes, and probed some historical reasons why

we have allowed the situation to get to this point. The next question is one of moral culpability. Have we sinned against creation?

In Greek the word for sin, *hamartia*, means "to miss the mark," to be off center, in disharmony with the way God meant things to be. Original sin, the sin at the origins of all other sin, is the refusal to be in radical interdependence with everything else, God and creation alike, and to set oneself at the center of the universe. It is a desire to be apart, independent, to follow one's own rules regardless of the effect on others. Certainly, this description of sin matches the effects on the environment made by human choices.

The moral dimension of the environmental crisis should be clear to anyone who follows even only one angle of the problem. Real people are being hurt, measurable damage to the earth is being done, the next generation is being jeopardized. The lack of respect for nature and the profanation of the environment are great moral challenges that we face today. John Paul II speaks of the challenge this way:

The most profound and serious indication of the moral implications underlying the ecological problem is the lack of respect for life evident in many of the patterns of environmental pollution. Often, the interests of production prevail over concern for the dignity of workers, while economic interests take priority over the good of individuals and even entire peoples.¹⁴

Sins against the environment are perpetrated by individual acts and choices. But, like original sin, we all participate in environmental sin, whether or not we are party to individual offenses.

Environmental sin is a social sin of the highest magnitude because it inflicts actual and potential harm not only on ourselves and the whole human community, but on the earth itself. As in the case of social sin, the wrong is often done unconsciously because it is perpetrated by a system we

time. In a horrible way, it is like you never have to have a quiet moment alone with your own mind again which is really scary.

Most of us live in a trance, he goes on to say:

We're on automatic, run by emotional reactions. Ordinary consciousness is such a crowded, hurrying along of these automated reactions that we don't have time to be intelligent and reflective. A consequence of this, aside from its inherent sadness, is that we do a lot of stupid things and we suffer from them.¹⁵

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have created and which is sustained by our lifestyle. But, in the words again of Pope John Paul II, the lack of intention today must be regarded as "unacceptable thoughtlessness." It is time to wake up.

The Sin of Being Asleep

In his book *Waking Up*, Charles Tart observes that today people are, for the most part, asleep.

The opportunities to distract yourself are bigger than ever. You used to have only ten channels of television. Now you can get a satellite dish and choose from hundreds of channels and surf the web at the same

In our culture of distraction, we leave no room for seeing what is really going on. And so we buy into the illusions that there's plenty to go around and it is ours for the taking and nobody will get hurt. We have fallen into the habit of taking the short view of things. We blithely sacrifice the beauty and diversity of creation for our immediate convenience and entertainment. In this context, ignorance is bliss. The short view prevents us from seeing the damage that our choices wreak on God's people and on God's Earth. If we are asleep we can avoid the pain which comes from seeing what is really

going on. Being asleep is a way of numbing our consciences so we may live as we "deserve." After all, we worked for it.

There may have been a time in our personal moral development when being asleep was excusable. That time is over. We all share in a moral responsibility to wake up and take the long view.

The long view is the contemplative view. Contemplation looks at what is there, not what we want or need to see. The contemplative is attentive to the full reality of whatever is in the present moment. This kind of awareness, stripped of

point for most of us, as we watch our minds flit about like monkeys in a tree. Brain research has shown that our brains have developed so that its chief function is to filter out what is going on around us. We can't pay attention to everything, so we have learned to automatically select what is needed for our survival. Children with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) do not have a certain chemical in their brains to allow them to do this and so they cannot focus on one task. But, if this function of the brain is not balanced with "open time" when we

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questions from the past and figuring out what to do and analyzing and differentiating this from that, inevitably leads to a non-dualistic awareness of the unity of all that is. The contemplative experiences the inter-relatedness of all creation, knows immediately that all life is shared life, shares the heartbeat of the world.

There may have been a time when contemplative communion with the earth was the standard mode of viewing life. But, for us today, it needs to be cultivated. Five minutes of "just sitting" proves that

simply breathe in and breathe out in communion with all beings, mental sickness sets in.

If our state of personal and social slumber is a major contributing factor to sins against our environment, then our decision to cultivate reflexive awareness can be our gift to the evolutionary process. The development of a culture of contemplation will bring forth a collective insight into the universe which sees it as a communion of subjects whose life we respect and interdependently share. Thus, a contemplative way of life can rescue us and save the earth.

The Sin of Busyness

Closely related to our sin of being asleep is our sin of busyness. Certainly it is not morally wrong to work hard to support oneself and contribute to society. But when busyness takes over our lives and consumes our spirit and eats up our Earth in production, then we enter into another kind of sin against the environment.

Our culture is locked into busyness. Part of our ritual language of greeting is "Keeping busy?" The expected answer is "Yes," along with a few sentences of explanation of just how busy we are. The busyness is part of the cycle of work-and-spend that is destroying both us and the planet. We work hard so we may buy (more than we need) and then need to work more to pay for what we have bought. Oddly enough, the things we are working to buy are most often things to help us relax and save time.

The temptation to be overly busy apparently is an old habit. Commentators on the Jewish prescription of the Sabbath point out that for neighboring cultures the work "week" was much longer than six days. Thus, to witness to their belief that God was their provider, the Jewish people set aside every seventh day for rest. Actually, the full Sabbath observance can be seen as an early version of the Environmental Protection Agency: rest weekly to remember whose work we are doing; rest

every seventh year to let the earth restore herself; rest every fiftieth year to allow everyone and everything to return to its original bio-region. Jesus himself opened his ministry with the proclamation of this fiftieth jubilee year. Through his ministry, humanity and all creation were to be liberated.¹⁶

Christ Can Reconcile Us with the Earth

Let's admit it. We have abused the body of the earth. We have sold our Earth for profit. We are in collusion with our government leaders who choose economic growth over sustainability of the resources of the planet. We swallow the slogans of our advertisers and believe progress is our most important product. Put crudely, we are pimps, tax collectors, and suckers. But happily, we know that to see ourselves as such is the beginning of our way out of the crisis. The gospel tells us over and over that the sinner is in a special position to receive divine mercy. If we can admit our powerlessness and acknowledge our sinfulness, we will hear the words of forgiveness with its admonition to "go and sin no more." If we realize deep down that we don't have ultimate control over our lives or that of the planet, then we can begin to reverse the behaviors that have put us in such jeopardy.

The call is out for conversion on a colossal scale. "The environmental crisis of our

own day constitutes an exceptional call to conversion . . . We need a change of heart to save the planet for our children and generations yet unborn."¹⁷ The task of our time is to integrate our lives with that of the planet, to integrate the human with the cosmological. "Sustainable development requires radical shifts . . . in the way we view the nature and purposes of science and technology and in our patterns of production, consumption, and lifestyle."¹⁸

The environmental crisis of our own day constitutes an exceptional call to conversion . . . We need a change of heart to save the planet for our children and generations yet unborn.

We are being called to transform our worldview from one of anthropocentricity to biocentricity.

We can't do this alone. Just as our sin is a social sin, so, too, our conversion must be a social conversion. Few issues demonstrate our need to work with one another more than environmental ones. After all, acid rain doesn't stop falling at the Canadian border! If we have sinned together, only together can we move beyond our sin. Solidarity with one another, not individualism, will rescue us from the impending tragedy.

All great transition moments are sacrifice moments. The first generation of stars sacrificed themselves for the

next phase of the evolutionary process. At this moment, we are being asked to give back to the earth what we have taken. We are being called to learn again the ways of nature and to respect their stern requirements. This is the time to sacrifice our small self for the larger self of the ecozoic world.

Brian Swimme loves to tell of the generosity of the sun which expends itself freely and continuously in order to

give us life.¹⁹ It is not unlike the other "sun," the Son of God who has rescued us from the power of death. In Christ, all things are reconciled: "For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross."²⁰

And how was this reconciliation effected? In a shocking text in the letters of St. Paul, we read about the mechanism for reconciliation. Christ not only sacrificed his life for us, but he took on our sins to the extent that he "became sin."²¹ By identifying himself with sin all in sin was restored.

Our hope for the future of our world is found in Christ. He is there in the midst of all our environmental sins, taking them on and restoring what has been broken to wholeness again. We need to find him here and join him in his work of reconciliation.

Conclusion

This article began with a statement of the negativity with which I approached its composition. Unquestionably, the topic is sobering. But, if we believe that Christ is with us as we absorb the facts of our present environmental situation and feel the pain of the world and allow ourselves to grieve and repent, we will discover the vitality and inner power needed to act creatively and decisively for the future age of the world. As Joanna Macy discovered in her own grief work with many people, when we acknowledge the truth of our situation and let surface our pain for the world, we connect with it and help bring about its rebirth.²² The shedding of tears over our sins against creation is an antidote to sadness and despair and an unction for the mending of the earth. It is a baptism of repentance which sets our feet on the way to renewed life.

As Sisters of Mercy we are committed to "act in solidarity with the economically poor of the world." Our dear Earth is

one of these poor for whom we have pledged to give preferential treatment. And so our works of mercy are expanding to support sustainable agriculture, to preserve endangered species, to protect wild places, to keep the air clean, to restore the land—all ways of acting "in harmony and interdependence with all creation." When we understand the ramifications of protecting the environment, it is clear that such efforts are an ultimate work of mercy.



Notes

[This talk was originally presented as part of a conference-retreat, "The Earth Pleads for Mercy," held at Mercy Center, Burlingame, July 30–August 3, 1997.]

1. Anthony Pilla, "Christian Faith and the Environment," *Origins* 20 No. 21 (November 11, 1990): p. 333.
2. Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme, *The Universe Story*. San Francisco: Harper, 1992, p. 254.
3. See Joanna Macy, *Despair and Personal Power in the Nuclear Age*. Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1983.
4. The statistics presented here have been gathered from a great variety of sources, and while the exact numbers and projections may vary slightly from source to source, the main thrust of

the "case" presented is consistently the same.

5. Hos 4:1b–3.
6. Berry, *The Universe Story*, p. 242.
7. United States Catholic Conference, "Renewing the Earth," *Origins* 21, No. 36 (December 12, 1991), p. 426.
8. Paul VI, quoted in "Renewing the Earth," p. 430.
9. Michael Pfeifer, "What is Ecospirituality?" *Origins* 24, No. 36 (February 23, 1995), pp. 606–8.
10. John Paul II, "Peace with All Creation," *Origins* 19, No. 28 (December 14, 1989), #8.
11. Berry, *The Universe Story*, p. 241.
12. Brian Swimme, *The Hidden Heart of the Cosmos*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1996.
13. Elizabeth Johnson, "The Cosmos: An Astonishing Image of God," *Origins* 19, No. 13 (September 12, 1996), p. 206.
14. John Paul II, "Peace with All Creation," No. 7.
15. Charles Tart, *Waking Up: Overcoming Obstacles to Human Potential*, Boston: New Science Library, 1986.
16. See Luke 4:16–22 and Rom 8:18–25.
17. Berry, *The Universe Story*, p. 432.
18. James Malone, "Environmental Degradation and Social Injustice," *Origins* 11, No. 40 (March 18, 1993), p. 693.
19. Swimme, *The Hidden Heart of the Cosmos*.
20. Col 1:19–20; see Rom 7:24–25.
21. See 2 Cor 5:21.
22. See Macy, *Despair and Personal Power in the Nuclear Age*.

The Feminine Way and Hope for the Future

Patricia Ryan, R.S.M.

SOME YEARS BACK, I attended a workshop where a poet from New York described his involvement with children in a program called "Poetry in the Schools."¹ He gave the children in a poor ghetto area an assignment to write a poem which began with the words, "When I grow up I am going to be . . ." One little girl came back with the following:

When I grow up I am going
to be a movie star
and if I get fired from that
I'm going to be a ballerina
and if I get fired from that
I'm going to be a river.

In myths or fairy tales, it is frequently the third choice that is, as Goldilocks exclaimed, "just right." Angeles Arrien, in her study of the five universal shapes, learned that when people were asked to put the shapes in order of preference, the first choice is around where we think we are or where we would like to be. The second is where our real strengths are, and the third, as in myths, is where the real core work is going on. The identification of the feminine with nature is based on the life-giving and nurturing role of women. The native American references to Mother Earth and Father Sky are symbolic of gender differences. Robert Browning wrote, "a man's reach should exceed his grasp or what's a heaven

for?" His wife Elizabeth in her famous sonnet expressed the feminine inclination where she said, "I love thee to the level of every day's most quiet need."

It is not surprising that glaring connections are being pointed out these days be-

that knowledge is power, that knowledge is money. But knowledge without wisdom is deadly. Obsessed with the tree of knowledge, we've alienated ourselves from the garden. Let us return and feast from the tree of life and heal ourselves and the garden."

Our task is to move away from focusing
on the tree of knowledge and return to
the tree of life in order to heal ourselves
and the garden.

tween the oppression of the feminine and the destruction of the earth. They are closely interlined. Hence our topic, "The Feminine Way and Hope for the Future." I am not advocating a feminine way to replace the masculine, but simply to balance it. However, as the pendulum has swung too far in one direction, for a time it will probably be necessary to have a major shift in the opposite direction.

In looking at the issue of caring for the feminine and for nature, the image which surfaced for me was a garden. A friend gave me the lovely 1997 calendar published by the Sisters of St. Joseph of La Grange, Illinois. On the February page, I read, "It is said

These words clearly lay out our task; it is to move away from focusing on the tree of knowledge and return to the tree of life in order to heal ourselves and the garden. The healing is two-fold. If we involve ourselves totally in actions around preservation and recycling and never go within to explore the damaged feminine, we will be ineffectual. And if we narcissistically spend our time probing the inner garden bemoaning the ruins and the undeveloped feminine while neglecting to direct any energy toward immediate needs for action, we will also be ineffectual.

In case this seems like poetic generalizations, what specifically is involved in moving away from the tree of

knowledge and returning to the tree of life? The first step is awareness—to carefully watch and notice all the ways in which we have been programmed by our education and culture to value reason, efficiency, and progress and to place these at the top of the hierarchical pyramid in our daily choices. How often do we ignore the needs of our bodies, and stifle our emotions. We might ask ourselves, "How much of my day do I spend in my head?"

Once our awareness is heightened, then I think it is necessary to acknowledge loss.

If we allow ourselves to surface feelings
over what has been lost and to grieve over
losses like this, we might become needed
agents for change.

Environmentalists tell us that between now and the next century losses in plant and animal species will exceed all other species' extinction in history. These species are vital to ecological balance and therefore to our survival. In the United States, between four and six billion tons of top soil are being lost every single year. If this continues, there is no possibility of feeding people because there will not be enough soil to grow the food.

And, in a parallel vein, what has been lost interiorly as the feminine has been diminished? What beauty and meaningful relationships are missing from our lives as we have

succumbed to the demands of achievement and acquisition? Reflect on a poem by Mary Oliver:

The Sun

*Have you ever seen
anything
in our life
more wonderful*

*than the way the sun,
every evening,
relaxed and easy,
floats toward the horizon*

*and into the clouds or the hills,
or the rumpled sea,
and is gone—
and how it slides again*

*out of the blackness,
every morning,
on the other side of the world,
like a red flower*

*streaming upwards on its
heavenly oils
say, on a morning in early
summer,
at its perfect imperial distance—
and have you felt for anything*

*such wild love—
do you think there is anywhere, in
any language,
a word billowing enough
for the pleasure*

*that fills you,
as the sun
reaches out,
as it warms you*

*as you stand there,
empty handed—*

*or have you too
turned from this world—*

*or have you too
gone crazy
for power
for things?*

How often in your life have you missed the opportunity for the experience she describes? What were you doing that was more important? I think we can challenge the old adage about not crying over spilt milk—why not? I suggest that, if we allow ourselves to surface feelings over what has been lost and to grieve over losses like this, we might become needed agents for change. Unless we change, it becomes daily more evident that this beautiful Earth as we have known it is doomed. The pain of loss due to lack of sensitivity and care of our soul can drive us to change, to get out there and begin to heal the garden.

A garden is considered by the Sufis as a symbol for the world of the soul. They have a meditation practice that connects with the four elements: earth, air, water, and fire. Each of these elements is essential to life in the physical garden. Soil provides nutrients for growth. We know what happens to plants that are not watered. There is a carbon dioxide-oxygen exchange between plants and the air. The fire of the sun gives the heat needed for growth. In a Sufi retreat at Findhorn, I learned a practice that I would like to suggest for you as a meditation.

Each of the four elements is connected with one of the four ways that we can breathe. Close your eyes. Imagine your soul as a lovely garden. Look around and notice which plants are growing there. Now, keeping the image of the garden as a background, pay attention to your breath. Breathe in and out of your nose. Let this represent Earth, which your inner garden needs. Now continue paying attention to your breath, but breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth. Let this represent Water for the inner garden. This time shift the breaths that you take so that you breathe in through your mouth and out through your nose. This represents Fire. Finally, breathe in and out of your mouth representing Air. Bring your attention back to where you are. This simple practice is a way of honoring the four elements and respecting our need to attend to our inner garden. The way that I can remember which is connected to which element is this set of associations.

1. The normal way to breathe on Earth is in and out of the nose.
2. Our exhaled breath contains Water. If you hold a mirror to your mouth as you breathe out, it fogs up.
3. Think of a dragon snorting Fire out of its nose.
4. If you are trying to get Air into someone's lungs through CPR, you clamp their nose and get them to

breathe in and out of the mouth.

What does this have to do with the feminine way? (As I ask that question, I'm aware of shifting back to the masculine mode of needing a reason for things.) But to answer the question, I believe that there is a stillness about the deep feminine that this practice assists.

Consider now another poem in which the poet William Butler Yeats describes the same feelings as the poem by Mary Oliver evokes, but in a more interior place.

Sadness is not the only emotion that a realization of the loss of the feminine provokes. There is also anger.

Down By the Salley Gardens

*Down by the salley gardens my
love and I did meet
She passed the salley gardens
little snow-white feet.
She bid me take love easy, as the
leaves grow on the tree;
But I, being young and foolish,
with her would not agree.*

*In a field by the river my love and
I did stand,
And on my leaning shoulder she
laid her snow-white hand.
She bid me take life easy, as the
grass grows on the weirs;
But I was young and foolish, and
now am full of tears.*

The first exposure to the poem "Down by the Salley Gardens" perhaps suggests a simple little ditty about young

love. But the formidable signature, "W. B. Yeats," at the bottom causes one to take a second look. This poem was set to music by another formidable artist, Benjamin Britten. In his musical arrangement, it is evident that Britten felt a certain sorrowful seriousness coming from the poem. When I learned that Yeats translated from the Irish this traditional song of an old woman, I saw new possibilities. For an old woman, the young love that she meets is her inner girl-child whom she did not listen

to and consequently later experiences sorrow as a result of not agreeing with wise directions. That this is a song of loss was confirmed when I learned that salley trees are willows, and willows weep.

Sadness is not the only emotion that a realization of the loss of the feminine provokes. There is also anger. In the Song of Songs (1:6) we read, "My mother's sons turned their anger on me. They made me look after the vineyards. My own vineyards I had not looked after." The realization that women have been forced in so many ways to do the masculine thing at the expense of their own feminine way produces anger. It is important that this anger is

would be very meagre. Our sensitivities would be dull because our inner world would reflect the outer world . . . think of being born on the moon and then coming to the earth. What a stunning, beatific experience that would be!²

He goes on to say, "Speculatively, we could talk about God as being prior to our outside creation or independent of creation, but in actual fact

amic or masculine realization that they valued or dominant modern and recent undeniable why we are in difficulties which we today.

there is no such being as God without creation. When a person associates the creation with the divine, it is the existential fact that there is no God without creation and there is no creation without God."³

When describing the powers that brought the universe into being at the beginning, Berry sees them as twofold. There was an expansive and differentiating force which was

feminine: dynamism and magnetism. She suggests that we think of energy, not gender in exploring the functions found in all cultures. The masculine functions being around words, language, deeds, productivity, power, leadership, and meaning. By contrast, the feminine functions are around vision, intuition, perception, beauty, nurturance, healing, ritual, ceremony, planning, and organization. Persons of both genders, female and male, have all functions to some degree. I find these distinctions helpful in further clarifying what is meant by the feminine way. Examining the dynamic or masculine functions with the realization that they have been the more valued or dominant functions governing modern and recent society, it is understandable why we are in the environmental difficulties which we face today. Masculine functions cluster around the tree of knowledge rather than the tree of life.

Another classification that may be helpful in describing the feminine way comes from a course I took entitled "Feminist Poetics." We studied many women poets who seemed to be writing from a more feminine perspective than many of

both-and vision, putting emotional vulnerability and moral change at the center of the work. I think that as a woman writes, so she is. If we take the opposite of these characteris-

for seeds of hope for the future? I believe that we find the seeds for hope when we take a hard look at the source of the problem. We are in this mess because of our attitude that

We are in this mess because of our attitude that the goods of the earth are for human consumption—the more, the better. We need to see ourselves as part of the interdependent community of the cosmos.

tics as being male, the dominant mode in current and recent societies, it is possible to analyze their influence on present environmental situations. For example, a hierarchical value system gives “higher” life forms precedence over “lower” or “non-life” forms.

And now we come to the second part of the title, hope for the future.

Information on the environmental situation is mainly bad news. Where do we look

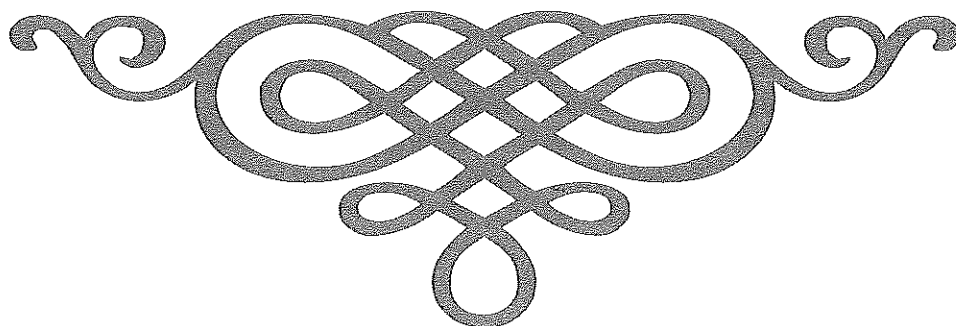
the goods of the earth are for human consumption—the more, the better. We need to see ourselves as part of the interdependent community of the cosmos. The members of this cosmic family are animals, plants, humans, rocks, rivers, and stars. Once we see the delicate interaction of the ecosystem as essential to a sustainable future, we are on our way to solving environmental problems. As Pogo wisely said a long time ago, “We have met the enemy and it is us.” This

“us” is not merely humans littering the landscape, but especially every woman who continues to oppress the feminine child within, every woman who is living life to the masculine hilt of reason, efficiency, and progress, every woman who is not doing her bit to balance the scales. Some men have highly developed feminine functions—as indicated by the quotes from Yeats and Thomas Berry—but most do not have the capability. They cannot do it. It is up to us as women.



Notes

1. This paper was originally presented at a conference-retreat, “The Earth Pleads for Mercy” held at Mercy Center, Burlingame, California, July 30-August 3, 1997. Portions of this presentation were printed in “Justice News” of the West-Mid-West Region of September, 1997.
2. Thomas Berry, *Befriending the Earth*, Mystic, Connecticut: Twenty-Third Publications, 1995, pp. 9–10.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 10.



Ecological Deterioration

A Theological Reflection

Ray Maria McNamara, R.S.M.

Introduction

ECOLOGICAL DETERIORATION, an expression used by Sallie McFague, aptly describes the ecological crisis facing our world.¹ It portrays a slow and subtle laying to waste of our planet and its multiple life forms. This crisis is extremely complex, requiring multiple layers of analysis in order to deal with its many causes and

reflection, a view of theology's role in addressing and dealing with ecological deterioration will be made clear.

This essay is divided into three major sections. It begins with a naming of the problem, both its physical manifestations in the environment as well as the social implications and how these are interrelated. In dealing with any issue, it is critical to assume re-

Ecology has to do with home and all the multiple interrelationships that make the place called Earth a home.

consequences A visit to any book store would reveal numerous books and journals dealing with this environmental nightmare, including many recommended solutions of the problems. As both a student and a teacher of the sciences for over twenty years, I have become more and more frustrated with conservation efforts that seem to repair surface wounds without getting to the heart of the matter. For this reason, I have turned to theology to help me deal with my questions of how to respond to the earth that moans and her people who cry for mercy. It is my hope that through this theological re-

sponsibility for the problem, to take ownership of it. In the case of the ecological crisis, before Christianity can effectively deal with this issue, it must take responsibility for its part in creating the crisis. Therefore, the second section addresses both the human and religious responsibility for the crisis. Lastly, I respond to the issue of ecological deterioration through three different lenses: the ministry of Jesus, the Trinitarian nature of God, and the gift of the Holy Spirit. The essay concludes with summary comments about the role of theology in ecology using perspectives from this reflective process.

Naming the Problem

The word ecology was first used by a German biologist, Ernst Haeckel in 1866. He took two Greek words, *oikos* (home) and *logos* (reflection or study) and coined the word ecology which he defined as "the study of the interdependence and interaction of living organisms (animals and plants) and their environments (inanimate matter)."²

It has come to mean the "study of the conditions and relations that make up the habitat (house) of each and every person and, indeed, organism in nature."³ It is clear to see that ecology has to do with home and all the multiple interrelationships that make the place called Earth a home. According to Leonardo Boff, "ecology has to do with the relations, interactions, and dialogue of all living creatures (whether alive or not) among themselves and with all that exists, including not only nature but culture and society as well"⁴ An ecological perspective would be one of recognizing the interrelationships involving all of creation. From this perspective of interdependence, nothing in creation is seen as expendable; all of creation is mutually interdependent. Therefore, the home of human beings is more than a specific time and place.

Home is the very interconnectedness of all of creation. It is the mutual interdependence that is home. Our "homework," then, is tending this web of interconnections.

The purpose in giving a brief account of environmental evidence of the ecological crisis is not to present a comprehensive list of what is happening in nature. There are books that do this very well. However, for the sake of this reflection, it is important to have a sense of the scope of the problem. The breach in the web of the natural world appears as global warming, toxic wastes, atmospheric changes, and accelerated rates of extinction.⁵ There are data to illustrate that entire ecosystems have been disrupted, that there is massive destruction of habitats, loss of biodiversity, and the exhaustion of resources.⁶ Moltmann describes the problem as one of an uncontrollable process of growth: populations, industry, pollution, use of energy, exposure to stimuli, and a growing mental and spiritual instability among men and women.⁷ Pope John Paul II, in his address on the World Day of Peace in 1990, named the problem as one of a "lack of due respect for nature."⁸ These are all examples of environmental injustice.⁹ They have resulted in a break in the integrity of creation.¹⁰

This crisis within the natural world is very serious and in many cases irreversible. These problems are clearly ecological, dealing with the

natural world that we call home. The crisis is ecological because these problems both reflect and contribute to the social crisis of marginalization and poverty affecting the delicate balance of interdependence among peoples and between peoples and their environment. Boff tells us that "all earthly creatures are threatened, beginning with the poor and the marginalized."¹¹ One cannot deal adequately with environmental

natural concerns to the side for the sake of production, the poor have been marginalized to the outskirts of towns and cities and, more importantly, to the concerns of those who can make a difference. According to Gudymas, the poor are driven to live in the worst environments because these places are "free" due to their bad environmental quality.¹⁴ In order to survive, the poor are driven to poaching, both for food and for income. They

These problems both reflect and contribute to the social crisis of marginalization and poverty affecting the delicate balance of interdependence among peoples and between peoples and their environment.

problems without dealing with our social problems. "Overcoming the oppression of the environment cannot be addressed in isolation from other forms of oppression such as sexism, racism, and classism."¹² As we have functionalized nature, using it for our needs, so too are workers seen as "human resources" and as mere functions of production.¹³

A graphic example of the interrelationship between people suffering from poverty and a wounded land is seen in an article by Eduardo Gudymas. He states that the connection between poverty and ecology is one of marginality, that as we have pushed

exhaust the soil trying to raise enough food to support themselves and their families. "Forced to live on bad land, lacking water, without additional resources to improve their crops or livestock, they end up causing more environmental damage, which in turn increases their poverty."¹⁵ The impoverishment of the land impoverishes people and vice-versa. The interconnections remain, regardless of the conditions.

The approach, thus far, has been of the outsider seeing what can be observed—scientific data that indicates an environmental deterioration and the witness of those persons suffering from

poverty. In the next section, the reflection moves to a deeper level, examining the human responsibility for these conditions. The view shifts from that of observer to participant.

Responsibility

Any efforts to effect change must include an ownership of the problem. As a citizen of the United States, a first-world country located in the northern hemisphere, it has caused me deep pain and sorrow to learn of the many ways that my country and my own lifestyle

beings have brought on themselves and their natural environment, and into which they are driving both themselves and the environment and all its life systems more and more deeply.¹⁷ We have done and are continuing to do this to ourselves, each other, and our environment.

Secondly, it is essential that we admit that the crisis had "its starting point in the modern industrial countries,"¹⁸ and that these "countries are the main contaminants of the planet."¹⁹ These countries not only produce the majority of the toxins that

everyone can be saved in a system of communal solidarity and participation on the ship—or, as a result of outrage and revolt, the ship will explode and throw everyone into the sea.²⁰

From a secular perspective, then, the ecological crisis can be said to be caused first by the human species and secondly by the industrial and economically powerful countries of the world. These countries have both poisoned the earth and set up systems of power that have created lives of poverty in third world countries. The irony, according to Boff, is that the revolt of the earth will affect not only the poor, but all peoples, even the rich and powerful, will suffer.

Boff, in *Ecology and Liberation*, carries the question of responsibility one step further by asking if Christianity is co-responsible for the present ecological crisis. His answer is yes; Christianity has had a *decisive* (my emphasis) influence.²¹ He states that it is the Christian belief in creation that has had a strong impact on social systems of domination and control. Moltmann supports this when he says we "cannot ignore the historical effects of the Christian belief in creation."²² This Christian belief came from a "misunderstood and misused biblical belief in creation, for 'subdue the earth' was viewed as a divine command given to human beings—a command to dominate nature, to conquer the world and to rule over it."²³ This view of domination has

The ecological crisis can be said to be caused first by the human species and secondly by the industrial and economically powerful countries of the world.

have contributed to the deterioration of the earth and the impoverishment of peoples. Rosemary Radford Ruether, in the introduction to *Women Healing Earth*, says that we in North America have to be more truthful about who we are in the system of power and profits, a system that causes oppression, poverty, and marginalization.¹⁶

To begin, one must admit that the ecological crisis is made by humans. What we know and observe are not "natural" occurrences in the world that have no direct bearing on the human community. "It is a crisis which human

are polluting the earth but also consume the majority of the resources, thus creating the conditions of poverty. Boff relates the situation to a journey on board a ship:

Astronauts who traveled into space and recorded their impressions of the earth describe it as a ship on a voyage. In fact, in this ship, which is the earth, a fifth of the population are traveling in first class and luxury class; they enjoy all the benefits. They consume 80 percent of the resources available for the voyage. The remaining 80 percent of the passengers are steerage. They suffer cold, hunger, and all kinds of privations . . . Either

influenced the construction of society so that one group dominates and harnesses the forces or resources of another.

This "freedom to dominate" has set up an anthropocentric view of the world with an instrumental value given to nature and to human persons. This view has interpreted the world as being given to humanity for its use. In addition to creating systems which oppress people and thus establish poverty, nature has also been made poor.

We have broken the integrity of creation by the excesses of our population and lifestyle, by our utilitarian attitude toward other creatures as well as toward our own vulnerable sisters and brothers, by our refusal to acknowledge the value of each and every aspect of creation to itself and to God. Nature is not necessarily and as such poor; it is so only because of one species, our own, which threatens the vitality and viability of the rest of nature.²⁴

In addressing ecological concerns whether natural or social, it is also important that representatives of Christianity recognize that the following statements are examples of an anthropocentric view of the natural world: "The human race is called to explore this order (of the cosmos) to examine it with due care and to *make use of it* (my emphasis) while safeguarding its integrity."²⁵ Or the assertion, "God has given the fruit of the earth to sustain the entire *human family* (my emphasis) without excluding or favoring any-

one."²⁶ Language, as participant in the construction of reality, requires of its users a conscious awareness of subtle messages that contribute to a hierarchical system of domination.²⁷ Christianity has and continues, therefore, to contribute to ecological deterioration through its understanding and teaching of the biblical story of creation as one where God decreed humanity's dominion of the earth, seeing the human spe-

Theological Response

The ecological crisis is viewed in this section through three perspectives: the ministry of Jesus, the concept of a Trinitarian God, and the Holy Spirit. Although there was not a crisis of natural ecology during Jesus' day, there were certainly the issues of marginalization and the poor. His ministry holds basic truths that can guide and support efforts to deal with the crisis.

Christianity with its teaching on God and the human relationship to God played a significant role in this wasting of creation.

cies as over nature and nature as here to serve human needs.

Thus far, the issue of ecological deterioration has been discussed from the perspective of problem and responsibility. The problem presents itself clearly as the wasting of both human and natural resources through the exercise of control and power. Those responsible are primarily persons living in industrialized, developed, first world countries. Christianity with its teaching on God and the human relationship to God played a significant role in this wasting of creation. I turn now to theology to determine what response it has to offer to the ecological crisis.

The Trinity shows a God who is relational and thus offers great possibilities for dealing with the problem. The Holy Spirit is the outpouring of God's presence and love in the cosmos.

Sallie McFague, in *The Body of God*, offers a model of the universe as God's body and shows the shape and scope of this model through the Christic paradigm, the story of Jesus.²⁸ She states that this shape and scope is love for all creation, especially the oppressed, the outcast, and the vulnerable.²⁹ She suggests two motifs in the ministry of Jesus that outline the shape of the body of God from a Christian perspective, Jesus' parables

and healing ministry.³⁰ These two perspectives on the ministry of Jesus show that he did, in fact, side with the outcast. Take for example the story of the Good Samaritan. In the parable, Jesus destabilizes the concept of privilege by having a Samaritan rather than a priest or Levite teach a lesson in compassion. By using the Samaritan, a social outcast, as the compassionate caregiver, Jesus gives value and distinction to the marginalized.

Jesus' healing ministry reveals that he was indeed an advocate for the oppressed. There are two things to ob-

Having shown, in the ministry of Jesus, an option for the poor, the oppressed, and the marginalized, the focus of the theological reflection shifts now to the Trinity as a paradigm of relationality in the universe. All of the created world is seen, in the Christian context, to be the result of a "trinitarian process: the Father creates through the Son in the Holy Spirit."³³ Catherine La Cugna tells us that God's inner relationality is the key to how God relates to the world. "Postulating relationality at the heart of God's essence cuts across the unitarianism that

intensity of living and is at "once the most intense excitement and the absolute rest of the love which is the well-spring of everything that lives."³⁶ "In the triune God is the mutuality and the reciprocity of love."³⁷ La Cugna carries this concept of the perichoretic life of the Trinity one step further in her chiasmic model of emanation and return. In this model, the immanent Trinity (in and of itself) and the economic Trinity (for the world) are not seen as separate but as:

one ecstatic movement of God outward by which all things originate from God, through Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, and all things are brought into union with God and returned to God. There is neither an economic nor an immanent Trinity; there is only the *oikonomia* (the divine plan that God and creation are destined to exist together in love and communion) that is the concrete realization of the mystery of theologia (the mystery of God) in time, space, history and personality."³⁸

Having been created by this triune God, the "world is complex, diverse, one, united, and interrelated because it is a reflection of the Trinity. God invades every being, enters into every relationship, erupts into every ecosystem."³⁹ In other words, God creates as God is. The interpenetration of the perichoretic Trinity into all of creation makes real the interrelatedness of all of creation and, more powerfully, makes ecology the reflection on or

The world is complex, diverse, one, united, and interrelated because it is a reflection of the Trinity.

serve. Jesus healed women, children, and lepers, all persons considered as less powerful or outcasts in his day. Second, Jesus healed physical bodies, which shows that the physical welfare of the marginalized mattered to Jesus.³¹ He did not spiritualize their situations, but acted to heal what was broken, what was sick, what was wounded. One learns from Jesus' ministry, not only of his power, but also of his deep concern for the marginalized and their physical needs. For McFague, naming the earth as the new poor extends Jesus' ministry of healing and wholeness to the planet and its many non-human creatures.³²

sees relationship as secondary and nonessential to God, autonomy and self-possession as primary. Personal interrelationship indicates the manner of God's relationship with the world, and diversity among the divine persons as a principle of affirmation of the diversity within creation."³⁴

Perichoresis is a Greek word often used to describe the interrelationship within the Trinity. Its meaning states that each person of the Trinity "contains the other two, each one penetrates the others and is penetrated by them, one lives in the other and vice-versa."³⁵ This trinitarian *perichoresis* manifests the highest

study of God's home, too. The trinitarian concept of creation, as interpenetration, could be used to determine a framework for an ecological theology.⁴⁰

Finally, a theological reflection on ecology would seem incomplete without including the Holy Spirit. The doctrine of the Trinity teaches that the "created world is therefore created by the Father, formed through the Son and exists in the Spirit."⁴¹ The Spirit is the "creative Matrix that grounds and sustains the cosmos,"⁴² providing cohesion, structure, energy⁴³ and is the origin of life.⁴⁴ The Spirit is the flow of God in all things, fills the universe,⁴⁵ and is God present and active in the world.⁴⁶ Because the Spirit creates all matter, then matter bears the mark of the sacred and has itself a spiritual radiance.⁴⁷ It is this very mark of the sacred, the presence of the divine in all of creation that gives the whole of the cosmos intrinsic value which challenges the notion that the planet was created for our benefit.⁴⁸ The recognition and acceptance of creation as a visible sign of God's givenness, modifies an anthropocentric view of the world, allows for a view of the cosmos that is theocentric and gives the human person "the chance to understand himself/herself as a member of the community of creation."⁴⁹ This belief in the Spirit allows for one to see God as life giving, "intimate to every

movement, animating all action, fueling freedom, and breaking down barriers. This line of thought generates a sense of all things as a single organism, pulsating to the heartbeat of the vivifying Spirit.⁵⁰ The Spirit breathes in all created things,⁵¹ filling them with the presence of God, thus making creation, not for the use of human beings, but for the glory of God.⁵²

Christianity, through its dualistic, hierarchical interpretation of the Genesis story of creation, has a share in this responsibility. The theological response in this study, though, has demonstrated that theology has major contributions to offer in the efforts to reverse this trend towards destruction.

The marginalized, oppressed, and the poor are seen in the Gospels to be a major

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Conclusion

This theological reflection highlights some of the environmental and social indicators of ecological deterioration being experienced at this time all over the planet. Both sets of indicators illustrate that this deterioration is due to a failure on the part of the human species to live within an ecological perspective, one that shows humans as a part of an intricate web of created matter called the cosmos. The responsibility for this failure falls not to the natural world but to people, especially those of the industrialized and developed nations of the world.

concern for Jesus. He not only took care of their physical needs, a lesson for the problem at hand, but also used them as teachers, as in the case of the Good Samaritan. Jesus invites us, through his ministry, to assume responsibility for the poor and to share in their experience of suffering. "Only life systems that are capable of suffering are capable of surviving, because they are the only ones that are prepared to learn and are open to change and renewal."⁵³ The invitation is to be at-one-with the suffering, whether human or non-human, animate or inanimate, for it is in the experience of suffering that we are truly capable of making a

difference. "Suffering sets the mind to work"⁵⁴ as well as the heart. In his concern for the marginalized and his willingness to take on their suffering, Jesus is the model par excellence of a theocentric, ecological perspective on the world.

The Trinity is the paradigm of relationality, of interconnectedness. As created by God, creation mirrors the divine and is thus perichoretic in nature—intimately related within itself. Therefore, "we and the world exist so that we may accept the invitation to share in God's superabun-

world, which thereby dwells within the sphere of the divine."⁵⁶ From this understanding of the Spirit, an ecological perspective of the cosmos sees each aspect of creation as mutually significant in and of itself.

There is value and need for theology to be involved in addressing ecological issues. Our environment cannot afford for us to depend on science for all the answers. Unless humans can accept that we are part of something bigger than ourselves and assume our place in the intricate web of creation and help to reestab-

lish the delicate perichoretic balance among all of creation, "we shall destroy ourselves and perish in the dying world we kill."⁵⁷ Theology, with its ability to witness to an option for the poor and to the sacredness of life, offers to humanity a way to participate in the stabilization of the balance of nature.

Our place and role in the web of creation is indeed unique and awe-full. As Thomas Berry reminds us, we are "that part of creation in whom the universe reflects on and celebrates itself in conscious self-awareness."⁶⁰ We not only know that we know, but we are capable of knowing that we are intimately connected to all that is and that this interconnectedness is interpenetrated with the sacred. Our fulfillment as persons gifted with life depends on how well we reflect the universe back to itself and how well we resonate within the divinely created rhythmic dance of creation.⁶¹ "Human beings are made in such a way that they always find themselves with and in creation. Human beings can be human and fulfilled only by fulfilling the world and by insertion in that world. We have a commitment that is profoundly ecological and intended to maintain the equilibrium of creation."⁶²

An ecological perspective of the cosmos sees each aspect of creation as mutually significant in and of itself.

dance and accompany God in the divine venture undertaken within our humanity and createdness."⁵⁵

As the presence of God breathed within and among all of creation, the Holy Spirit marks all that is, all that has ever been, and all that will ever be as sacred. This divine indwelling gives all of matter an intrinsic value, worth in and of itself, thus negating the utilitarian worth given to the natural world and human persons by systems driven by power and profit. "The Spirit fills the world and is in all things. Since the Spirit is also transcendent over the world, divine indwelling circles round to embrace the whole

Elizabeth Johnson, in her address to the Catholic Theological Society of America, says that the three pillars of theology are nature, God and humanity. She calls for theology to take an "inclusive turn to the heavens and earth and return to cosmology in order to restore fullness of vision and get theology back on

We choose to be at home,
and in this process, join with
all of creation in giving glory
to God.



Notes

1. Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993, p. 2.
2. Leonardo Boff, *Ecology and Liberation: A New Paradigm*, trans. John Cumming, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995, p. 9.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., p. 7.
5. Ruth Page?, "Theology and the Ecological Crisis," *Theology* 99 (March/April 1996): 106.
6. Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Woman, Earth, and Creator Spirit*, 1993 Madeleva Lecture in Spirituality, New York: Paulist Press, 1993, p. 7.
7. Jurgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God*, The Gifford Lectures, 1984-1985, trans. Margaret Kohn, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993, p. 28.
8. Pope John Paul II, "The Ecological Crisis; A Common Responsibility," in *This Sacred Earth: Religion, Nature, Environment*, ed. Roger S. Gottlieb, New York and London: Routledge, 1996, p. 230.
9. Leonard Boff, "Liberation Theology and Ecology: Alternative, Confrontation or Complementarity?" trans. Paul Burns, in *Ecology and Poverty: Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, ed. Leonardo Boff and Virgil Elizondo, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1995, p. x.
10. McFague, p. 166.
11. Boff, *Ecology and Liberation*, p. 12.
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Wisdom Becomes Torah

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Introduction

FORMING THE CENTER AND the climax of the Book of Sirach is a hymn to personified Wisdom (Sir 24:1–36), which includes a plethora of nature images that portray Wisdom as indigenous to and

carried out in Jerusalem (1 Macc 1:11–15; 2 Macc 4:7–17) under Jason the high priest (174–171 BCE). The author's grandson—the Greek translator—in the prologue² gives details about Ben Sira and his times, and mentions that he (the grandson) arrived

appeal of Hellenism, with its Greek culture and learning, proved very attractive. Some enthusiastically embraced Hellenism—adopting Greek thinking, customs and names—but others maintained Jewish traditions, modes of thinking, and customs, thus resisting Hellenization.

Writing about 180–175 BCE, immediately before the Hellenistic reform attempt, Ben Sira marks the end of the first encounter between Judaism and Hellenistic civilization and initiates a new era. He could hardly avoid the controversy with Jews who, because of their assimilation to Hellenism, had become almost completely alienated from the traditions of their ancestors. For him, such people were apostates from the law and no longer believed that God worked recognizably in their world. Sirach 24 portrays Wisdom as central to the life of Judaism (God commands Wisdom to “pitch her tent” in Jerusalem). The world has been created by God for the sake of human beings with a deep purposefulness and harmony that can be known; the central point of humanity is Israel, with a unique and miraculous history guided by God. In the Law of Moses, Israel is entrusted with the divine Wisdom itself, the power that orders the whole creation.

Ben Sira marks the end of the first encounter between Judaism and Hellenistic civilization and initiates a new era.

at home in the land of Israel. This figure, who appears in Proverbs, Sirach, Baruch, Wisdom of Solomon and probably Job, was created and developed within the Israelite/Jewish traditions by the wisdom writers. In the Book of Sirach, the author recreates a vibrant and flexible Wisdom figure, which, while revealing unmistakable links to the Wisdom figure in Prov 8:22–31, in this hymn is identified with the Torah of Moses¹ for a people who are tempted by Hellenism. Ben Sira's identification of Wisdom with Torah gives this figure a new orientation in Judaism.

The Book of Sirach can be dated to the first quarter of the second century, during the process of Hellenization

in Egypt in the thirty-eighth year of the reign of King Euergetes. It is generally agreed that 132 BCE is the date when Ben Sira's grandson went to Egypt and translated his grandfather's work into Greek in the years following, probably in the Hellenistic city of Alexandria—a place of religious and philosophical ferment—where questions about Jewish beliefs and traditions and their continuing relevance within the Hellenistic world were current. Such questioning resulted in turmoil and division among Jews, and combined with Judaism's suspicious attitudes toward the surrounding world, made allegiance to Judaism difficult, if not impossible for Jews for whom the universal

Reading Sirach 24

Introducing Wisdom (Sir 24:1–2)

*Wisdom sings her own praises,
among her own people she
proclaims her glory;
In the assembly of the Most High
she opens her mouth,
in the presence of his host she
declares her worth. —Sir 24:1–2*

In introducing personified Wisdom as singing her own praises to her own people (24:1–2) in “the assembly of the Most High” (24:2), the author seems to place Wisdom in the heavenly court,³ but it becomes clear as the poem progresses that she is in Jerusalem—in the Temple (Holy Tent)—apparently leading the “liturgy” (v. 10).⁴

Wisdom’s Journey (Sir 24:3–8)

*From the mouth of the Most High I
came forth, and mistlike covered
the earth.
In the heights of heaven I dwelt,
my throne on a pillar of cloud.
The vault of heaven I compassed
alone, through the deep abyss I
took my course.
Over waves of the sea, over all the
land, over every nation and
people I held sway.
Among them all I sought a resting
place; in whose inheritance
should I abide?
Saying, “In Jacob make your
dwelling, in Israel your
inheritance.” —Sir 24:3–8*

Wisdom begins her song by focusing on her journey from the mouth of God (24:3) through the vault of heaven to the abyss (v. 5; cf. Job 22:14; Prov 8:27) and concluding with God’s command to dwell

in Israel (24:8).⁵ The relationship between the two extremes is heightened by the repetition of the verb *kataskēnō* “to pitch one’s tent” (24:4, 8), and the accumulation of verb compounds of *kata-* (24:3–4, 8) emphasizes a descent. In issuing from the mouth of God (cf. Gen 1:2) and covering the earth like a mist (24:3), Wisdom is equated with the life-giving mist that waters the earth in Gen 2:4b–6.⁶ The Masoretic Text reads: “a mist rose up from the earth and watered the whole surface of the soil,”⁷ suggesting that Wisdom sustains the fruitfulness of the

the preexisting Temple in the heavens which YHWH showed to Moses, and in the image of which the Jerusalem Temple was built Exod 25:8–9, 10; 26:30; Sir 9:8).

Wisdom’s domain encompasses the entire universe, as intimated in the invocation of the four dimensions—two verticals (the heavens and the abyss) and two horizontals (the sea and the land)—of the Jewish cosmos (24:5–6a). She, like God, has dominion over sea, land, peoples, and nations.⁹ Although her domain is universal, in that all the peoples of the earth are included un-

**Ben Sira anchors Wisdom and the
wisdom tradition in the beginnings of the
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earth (24:5–6). By forming such links, Ben Sira anchors Wisdom and the wisdom tradition in the beginnings of the universe, and portrays her as a source of abundant life, the secrets of the universe and knowledge of God (cf. Sir 7:15–22).⁸ Her dwelling in the heights (24:4) echoes the earthly heights mentioned in Prov 1:20–21, while her presence in the pillar of cloud recalls the glory of YHWH’s presence in the cloud mentioned often in the Old Testament (Exod 13:21–22; in the Temple of Solomon “the cloud filled the house of YHWH” 1 Kgs 8:10; it filled

der her sovereignty (24:6b), Wisdom journeys in search of a resting place, not in the sky (24:4) but among people (24:7), until the Fashioner/Creator of all gave a command, and chose the spot for her tent instructing her to establish herself in Israel (24:8).¹⁰ The use of the verb *kataskēnō* denotes Wisdom’s dwelling in the heavenly court and in Israel.

Wisdom Pitches her Tent (Sir 24:9–12)

*Before the ages, from the first, he
created me,
and through the ages I shall not
cease to be.*

*In the holy Tent I ministered
before him, and then in Zion I
took up my post.
In the city he loves as he does me,
he gave me rest; in Jerusalem is
my domain.
I have struck root among the
glorious people;
in the portion of the Lord is my
inheritance. —Sir 24:9–12*

A change of focus is introduced in 24:9, with the Wisdom figure giving an account of her origins. She claims to have been created “before the ages,” and her future has no

“Ark of Testimony” (Exod 26:33; 40:21) because the two “tables of the testimony” given at Sinai (Exod 31:18) were kept inside it (Exod 25:16; 40:20). In Deut 10:8, the term “Ark of the Covenant” is used and in Deut 31:9, 26, we read that the scroll containing the deuteronomic version of the Law was given an honored place alongside the Ark. Wisdom here identifies herself as the Ark and in relation to YHWH in her ministering be-

*Like a plane tree I am lofty beside
the water. —Sir 24:13–15*

The linking of verses by “like” emphasizes the physical locations mentioned in the text with vv. 13–14 forming a unity with important geographical notations. From the literary point of view, the triple repetition of the verb *anupsōthēn* “I grew tall” suggests growth to an impressive size. Wisdom proclaims her excellence, and desirability by attributing to herself the qualities of some indigenous trees. The “cedar of Lebanon” (v. 13a)—the most majestic and celebrated tree in Syria-Palestine—was used as a metaphor for strength and beauty.¹⁴ The “cypress” (v. 13b) was noted for its great height.¹⁵ “Mount Hermon” (v. 13b) on the northeastern border of Palestine—near Lebanon—overlooked the ancient city of Dan and the sources of the Jordan. It remains to this day a sight of great beauty in the Middle East.¹⁶ Engeddi (v. 14a)—a town also known as Hazazon of the palms—is on the western shore of the Dead Sea, in the wilderness of Judea. It was famous for its date palms, which grew feather-like leaves and produced excellent dates.¹⁷ Jericho (v. 14b)—the city of Benjamin in the Jordan Plain west of the river Jordan—a luxuriantly fertile area, also called “the city of palm trees” (2 Chr 28:15), was noted for its magnificent rose gardens (v. 14).¹⁸ Olive trees “beautiful in appearance,” (v. 14c) the main fruit-bearing trees of the Mediterranean region, flourish in

Wisdom identifies herself as the Ark and in relation to YHWH in her ministering before the Lord, thus suggesting that she is the presence of YHWH leading the liturgy in the Holy Tent.

limits, “will not cease to be.”¹¹ Her relation to time is correlated with that of space (24:2–8¹²). Nevertheless, vv. 10–12 depicts Wisdom’s apparent geographical/symbolic location with the “Tent” which recalls the Ark of the Covenant in the Temple in Jerusalem. However, Ben Sira was writing in the Second Temple period when the ancient Ark—YHWH’s throne—had disappeared, presumably, but not demonstrably, because of the Babylonian destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem (587 BCE). Since no new ark had been constructed (Jer 3:16–17), it seems likely that he is portraying Wisdom as the substitute for the Ark.¹³ The Ark/Tent sheltered the

fore the Lord, thus suggesting that she is the presence of YHWH leading the “liturgy” *eleitourgēsa* (24:10) in the “Holy Tent.” Verses 11–12 speak of the “city he loves”—Jerusalem—as her domain and imply that “the glorious people” and “portion of the Lord” refer to the whole people of Israel.

Wisdom Flourishes Like a Tree (Sir 24:13–15)

*Like a cedar on Lebanon I am
raised aloft, like a cypress on
Mount Hermon.
Like a palm tree in Engeddi I
stand out, like a rose garden in
Jericho;
Like a fair olive tree in the
foothills,*

the foothills in the area known as the Shephelah.¹⁹ Plane trees (v. 14d) are found in small numbers mainly in the northern part of the Holy Land.²⁰ The inclusion of the phrase "beside the water"—while possibly emphasizing the source of the trees' growth in an arid land—may be linked with similar references in Pss 1:3; 63:1; 65:9; 107:35.²¹

Ben Sira, through this series of comparisons with indigenous trees and shrubs—familiar from earlier biblical texts and known for such qualities as beauty, strength, provision of nourishment, and attractiveness—attributes these qualities to personified Wisdom. In this section (vv. 13–15), the sites mentioned are near or on the borders of Israel. Gilbert surmises that we cannot escape the impression that the author intends to mark out the frontiers of the country occupied by a people for whom he was writing.²² Clearly, Wisdom claims to have "grown tall," and flourished in the whole of the land of Israel. However, these lines also evoke the imagery of the garden of Eden planted by God (Gen 2:8–9).

Wisdom in the Liturgy (Sir 24:15–17)

*Like a cinnamon, or fragrant cane, or precious myrrh, I give perfume;
Like galbanum and onycha and mastic, like the odor of incense in the Holy Tent. I spread out my branches like a terebinth, my branches so bright and graceful.*

I bud forth delights like the vine, my blossoms yield fruits fair and rich. —Sirach 24:15–17

A definite switch to images and vocabulary pertaining to the cult appears in v. 15 when the author introduces the imagery of perfumes and incense used in the service of the Meeting Tent in the wilderness.²³ "Cinnamon," "fragrant cane," and "precious myrrh" (v. 15a) were combined with cassia (tree bark used as a spice) and blended with olive oil to make a precious sacred perfume used in the anointing of Aaron and his sons, the

pleasure similar to that of a sweet-smelling perfume.

Imagery in vv. 16–17 returns to flora with Wisdom being likened to the "terebinth" (v. 16a)—a deciduous tree with red berries noted for its luxurious and expansive branches²⁶—and to the vine "Wisdom buds forth delights/grace" (v. 17a). In Israelite history, the terebinth was associated with non-Yahwist worship and cultic prostitution. Terebinth is also mentioned several times in the Old Testament as a tree that characterizes holy places. Some of Isaiah's harshest prophecies

Ben Sira attributes such qualities as beauty, strength, provision of nourishment, and attractiveness to personified Wisdom.

Tent, the ark of the commandments, and other sacred appurtenances.²⁴ It was also with chrism that the Temple was consecrated by anointing the Ark, the furniture in the sanctuary, and the priests. "Galbanum" (v. 15c), a bitter (aromatic gum), "mastic" (an aromatic gum from the mastic tree), and "onycha" (the calcareous plate on the foot of some mollusks) were blended with pure frankincense to produce the incense used in the liturgical service in the Tent. In v. 15d, Wisdom compares herself to "the odor of incense in the Holy Tent," thereby attributing to herself these qualities.²⁵ Wisdom gives

use the image of the terebinth to address the apostasy and unfaithfulness of the Israelite people,²⁷ as in "You will be like a terebinth with flourishing foliage" (Isa 6:13) which is addressed to the kingdom of Judah destined for destruction. The vine that yields only bitter juice also appears in many Old Testament texts as an image of Judah (Isa 5:1–7). A marked contrast is clear in the way these images are applied to Israel and to Wisdom. Wisdom in 24:16 is presented as a terebinth with marvelous branches, and as a vine producing delicious fruit. The image of the vine in Psalm 80 (79) is also evoked by Sirach,

when it is introduced in v. 12 with Wisdom saying "I have struck root among the glorious people," and is developed in the theme of Wisdom as a vine extending over the whole countryside from the sea (the coast-boundary) to the river (the inland boundary). Terebinth and vine, when used by the prophets for Israel, imply unfaithfulness and destruction, whereas the same images are used to suggest growth and fruitfulness in Sirach

Having pictured herself as possessing the richest of fruits and wine, Wisdom now addresses an invitation to the people to share in her banquet (vv. 19–22). This well-established Old Testament image (Prov 9:1–6; Isa 25:26; 55:1–3) carries with it distinct liturgical implications.³¹ In Isa 55:2–3, a banquet of "what is good" is given so that "your soul may live." It is also within the context of a banquet that the divine promise is given: "I

recalls in sapiential vocabulary the notion of blessings on the earth (cf. Pentateuch), by evoking images of a land flowing with milk and honey, and of a geographical expansion, which produces an abundance of the fruits of the earth (cf. Neh 9:25). The blessings of the earth are the ingredients for Wisdom's banquet, both those remembered and those of the future. Wisdom's memory, "you will remember me as sweeter than honey, better to have than the honeycomb" (24:20), draws attention to her all-pervading presence and endurance.³⁴ Sapiential expressions appearing in vv. 19–22 focus on Wisdom's invitation to: "be filled with her fruits," which are "fair and rich" (v. 17);³⁵ "you that yearn for me" (v. 19); "sweeter than honey," and "better . . . than the honeycomb" (v. 20);³⁶ anyone who eats and drinks of her delights "will hunger" and "thirst for more" (v. 21);³⁷ anyone who "obeys" Wisdom (cf. Prov 8:32a) "will not be put to shame"; while the fool—the person who does not keep the Law—will experience shame and disgrace (v. 22; cf. Ps 22:6).

Anyone who obeys Wisdom will not be put to shame; while the fool—the person who does not keep the Law—will experience shame and disgrace

24.²⁸ Wisdom produces fruits fair and rich, fruits of honor and wealth, and her domain is God's holy city, in which she addresses the people directly (24:17–19).²⁹ Wisdom's speech in the Jerusalem Temple highlights the centrality of the Temple in Sirach 24. Allusions to a Temple perspective and setting highlight the cult in Sirach.³⁰

will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David" (Isa 55:3). Contrary to every appearance, the permanent, everlasting covenant made with David is to endure, but now the covenant will be with "you" (in Hebrew, this is clearly a plural pronoun). As David was "a witness to the peoples" (Isa 55:4) in that his victories over the nations testified to the power of the Lord (Ps 18:43–45a), so now the people are to be witnesses to the nations, "you are my witnesses" (Isa 43:10, 44:8).³² The steadfast sure love (2 Sam 7:15; Ps 89:28) granted to the Davidic line is now for all.

Ben Sira uses the notion of remembering, associated with acts of worship in a variety of contexts.³³ Sir 24:20

Wisdom's Banquet (Sir 24:19–22)

Come to me, you that yearn for me, and be filled with my fruits; You will remember me as sweeter than the honeycomb. They who eat me will hunger still, they who drink of me will thirst for more; They who obey me will not be put to shame, those who work with me will never fail. —Sir 24:19–22

Wisdom and the Torah (Sir 24:23–29)

All this is true of the book of the Most High's covenant, the law which Moses enjoined on us, as a heritage for the community of Jacob. It is brimful, like the Pishon, with Wisdom—like the Tigris at the time of the new crops.

*It runs over, like the Euphrates,
with understanding;
like the Jordan at harvest time.
It floods like the Nile, with
knowledge; like the Gihon at
vintage time.
The first human being never knew
Wisdom fully,
nor will the last succeed in
fathoming her.
Deeper than the sea are her
thoughts;
her counsels than the great abyss.*
—Sir 24:23–29

Ben Sira's reflection on the role of Wisdom (24:23–29) is composed of six verses of two lines each, except for v. 23, which has three lines. This stanza, in which Ben Sira is again the speaker, identifies Wisdom with the Torah, thus providing a key to the discourse of Wisdom.³⁸ In contrast to the preceding and following verses, v. 23 is in prose, and begins with an emphatic statement that Wisdom is the Torah of Israel.³⁹ In defining Wisdom as the Torah, Ben Sira places her clearly within the Israelite tradition that stretches back to the Mosaic covenant, "a heritage for the community of Jacob," and to Israelite origins. References to Exod 24:7 "the book of the covenant," and to Deut 33:4 "the law which Moses commanded," link personified Wisdom with the whole of the Hebrew tradition. A linking of creation with the Law (Psalm 19) and observance of the Law with giving evidence of wisdom to the nations (Deut 4:6–9) assigns a sapiential twist to the Torah.⁴⁰ Wisdom is consistently the focal point. She is the Torah—the posses-

sion of Israel—which associates her with the divine presence in Israel. The author perceives Torah as a continually rising flood in relation to which his own teachings are a minor stream (Sir 24:25–29).

In the Pentateuch, we read of actions such as the creation of the world, the choice of Israel, the bestowal of the land in the center of which is situated the Temple of Jerusalem where the liturgy

over like the Euphrates with understanding" (v. 26a);⁴⁵ "like the Jordan at harvest time" (v. 26b); like the Nile that "floods with knowledge" (v. 27a); and "like the Gihon at vintage time" (v. 27b).⁴⁶ In naming the four branch rivers that flowed out of Eden (Pishon, Gihon, Tigris, Euphrates; Gen 2:10–14) as exemplifying features of Wisdom/Torah, an unmistakable connection is being made with the

A linking of creation with the Law and observance of the Law with giving evidence of wisdom to the nations assigns a sapiential twist to the Torah.

in honor of YHWH is celebrated, and from which comes the word of YHWH (Isa 2:4; Mic 4:2). Both *Torah* and *nomos* denote the whole of God's teaching in actions and in words.⁴¹ Verses 25–27 are paralleled and detail the benefits of *nomos* which are the overflowing of Wisdom, of which Torah is the expression.⁴² Those who listen to Wisdom are filled with what she is herself.

The overflowing of Wisdom is further elaborated upon in the portrayal of aspects of Wisdom/Torah in terms of six rivers associated with the history of Israel: "brimful, like the Pishon with wisdom" (v. 25a);⁴³ "like the Tigris at the time of the new crops" (v. 25b);⁴⁴ "running

Garden of Eden, and with the land of Israel. Perhaps there is also a suggestion that a complete union of Wisdom and Torah evokes the blessed setting depicted in Genesis 2.

Images of the Nile (Exod 1:22–2:14) and the Jordan (Josh 3:14–4:18) applied to Wisdom/Torah evoke pivotal "events" in Israelite history. The Nile recalls the fate of firstborn Hebrew male children in Israel and the saving of Moses from the water to become the one who leads the Hebrews out of bondage and receives the covenant at Sinai, while mention of the Jordan recalls the crossing of the Israelites with the Ark of the Covenant into the land of promise. Eden, Jerusalem, and the Temple are linked by the Gihon. Di

Lella notes that perfect balance is achieved in vv. 25–27 by having one river in each of the six lines.⁴⁷ Recalled in the linking of the Jordan and the Nile to the four rivers of Paradise is Gen 13:10, “the Jordan Plain was well watered everywhere like the garden of YHWH, like the land of Egypt.”⁴⁸ In addition, Gen 15:18 says “YHWH made a covenant with Abram, saying, “to your descendants I give the land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates.”⁴⁹ Sirach circumscribes the land by the Tigris, the Euphrates, and the Nile, and nominates the two rivers of Paradise as its boundaries. His paralleling of the Jordan (the river of entry into the promised land) with the Nile (the river flowing out of Egypt) implies a harmonization of the creation of Eden with the gift of the land, thus suggesting that Ben Sira sees the land of Israel as the Garden of Eden.

According to Ben Sira, it is in this land that Wisdom, of which Torah is the expression, is abundant. He continues to sketch Wisdom’s territorial expansion to the point of her “pitching her tent” in the Temple, and spreading over the entire land—the land of Paradise.⁵⁰ Sir 24:28–29 reiterates this in parallel and antithetical phrases highlighting the total incomprehensibility and immensity of Wisdom. “The first human being never knew Wisdom fully” (v. 28a) because the Torah, which is Wisdom, was not yet revealed,

and even the “last human being” on Earth will not “succeed in fathoming her” (v. 28b). This merism—first human and last human—emphasizes that Wisdom is beyond all human understanding and human attempts to attain her, as does the comparison of the sea with the abyss which further enlarges the image of Wisdom’s total incomprehensibility. Water is a particularly apt symbol of Wisdom. This well-established image of di-

Again will I send my teachings forth shining like the dawn, to spread their brightness afar off; Again will I pour out teaching like prophecy, and bequeath it to generations yet to come. —Sir 24:30–33

In vv. 30–34, Ben Sira reflects on the task of the wisdom teacher, who is both an “expositor of the Torah” (Sir 3:15) and one who “will pour out teaching like prophecy” (24:33). He sounds a humble note in claiming that he will leave his instruction to all fu-

Ben Sira reflects on the task of the wisdom teacher, who is both an expositor of the Torah and one who will pour out teaching like prophecy.

vine munificence and goodness (Isa 12:3; Jer 2:13; 17:13; Ps 36:9–10) is depicted in, “deeper than the sea . . . than the great abyss” (cf. Gen 1:2), where the chiasmic structure of v. 29 emphasizes Wisdom’s vastness and simultaneously concludes this section. Water imagery is retained in the next section by the equating of Wisdom with a great river.

Role of the Author/Wisdom Teacher (Sir 24:30–33)

Now, I like a rivulet from her stream, channeling the waters forth into a garden, Said to myself, “I will water my plants, my flower bed I will drench” And suddenly this rivulet of mine became a river, then this stream of mine, a sea.

ture generations (24:32–34).⁵¹ Ben Sira’s language in 24:30–34 does feature some prophetic echoes and, according to the Syriac version, it is said to be prophecy.⁵² Other sections of Sirach offer instruction to the wisdom teacher, but in a different vein.⁵³

Ben Sira likens himself, as a wisdom teacher, to “a rivulet from her stream” (v. 30a), thus continuing the imagery of vv. 25–29, “I am like a canal issuing from a river, like a watercourse I flow towards paradise.” This seems to link the stanza with the preceding verses, suggesting that the Torah makes Wisdom abundant in the same way as a river.⁵⁴ However, Ben Sira is not a river and he does not identify himself with Wisdom, but

claims to be but a tributary. He compares himself with a rivulet issuing from Wisdom's stream, which channels its waters into a garden to irrigate plants and flowers and in the process becomes a river and even a sea. Echoed here is

Ben Sira does not envisage the wisdom teacher as the source—the gushing spring—but likens him to a canal into which the source pours, and which takes the water to the garden to irrigate it with the water from the source, for

anew in his day so that the rich tradition of Wisdom/Torah would not be discarded or become outmoded in the face of Hellenism. As the riches and heritage of Wisdom and Torah are united, the role and function of this greatly enriched figure take on a more varied expression.

These new images of the Wisdom figure create new ways of perceiving the presence of God.

Ezek 47:1–12 where the water flows from the eastern side of the Temple, thus evoking the Gihon under the same name as the fourth river of paradise. Ben Sira—a resident in Jerusalem (Sir 50:27)—may be portraying himself as spreading Wisdom which he has already located in the Temple at Jerusalem (Sir 24:10). In Ezekiel the water from the Temple enables the desert land of Judah to be fruitful and blossom, and so transforms it into the garden of paradise. Ben Sira places the theme of paradise in this context (Sir 24:25–27, 30). Wisdom's development, as depicted in the antecedent verses, is mirrored in the activity of the author who may be claiming a role in maintaining the fruitfulness of the earth in the sense of being a bearer of wisdom (as he claims for Wisdom, according to the Greek of Sir 24:30b). Here a striking link with Gen 2:6–10 appears, “a river flowed out of Eden to water the garden.”

which he is the vehicle. As a channel of Wisdom, he proclaims his message so that it spreads abroad. Verse 32b suggests a view that extends beyond the borders of Israel (in spite of the focus on the land in this poem), in which the Diaspora is seen welcoming the Book of Sirach in the Greek version.⁵⁵ Ben Sira's portrayal of the Wisdom figure exhibits a multidimensional approach throughout, and he now applies this approach in his portrayal of himself—and wisdom teachers generally—as Wisdom's disciple, who by expanding his teaching, synthesizes time and geography for all who seek Wisdom (24:9b).

Thus the author gradually leaves the land of Israel and develops his theme by using imagery associated with the Garden of Eden, and with how he finally integrates the notions of place and time (seasons). In identifying Wisdom as Torah, Ben Sira reinterprets and presents Wisdom

Wisdom's Role in Sirach 24

Wisdom Portrayed in New Settings

Wisdom is portrayed in Sirach in new situations: singing her own praises from the assembly of the Most High (24:1–2), coming forth from the mouth of the Most High (v. 2), covering the earth like a mist (v. 3), having dominion over everything (v. 6), taking root in Jacob/Israel (v. 9), settling in Jerusalem and leading the liturgical service in the “Holy Tent” (v. 10), and being one with Torah (v. 23; cf. Bar 4:1–2). These new images of the Wisdom figure create new ways of perceiving the presence of God. Wisdom in Sirach reinterprets earlier traditions and makes available a new possibility, an alternative world, in which Wisdom speaks, offering a way of life based on the Torah.

Faithfulness to Wisdom Is Faithfulness to Torah

According to Sir 24:23, everything that Wisdom proclaims in her discourse corresponds to the Torah. As Wisdom's

discourse has nothing legalistic in it, a question arises as to the sense in which the claim is to be understood. No specific mention is made of any commandment of the Law, nor is a list of authorized injunctions provided. The last verses of Sirach 24 are couched as an invitation to become a disciple of Wisdom. So the Torah is not presented as a legal code or list of commandments binding on all who seek to be faithful to their heritage.

For Ben Sira, personified Wisdom and Torah are inseparable and become a unity in Israel.

In the time of Sirach, the Pentateuch—the Torah—was already familiar to the Jewish people. So it seems likely that Sir 24:23, in referring to the Torah, is speaking of the Pentateuch. These five books do contain laws, but these are inserted in a story covering Israel's sacred history from creation to the death of Moses in sight of the Promised Land on the eve of the conquest. It is not surprising that Sir 24:3 echoes Gen 1:1–3 and Deut 33:4 in evoking the history of the origin of the world, while Sir 24:7–8 highlights the election of Israel from among all the peoples.

Wisdom writers sought to address their audiences as people who shared the experiences of the physical world, and called them to understand the world as they perceived it.

They were aware that the world taught them something that was beyond it—something which in no way opposed the revelation of YHWH in their history—but was the experience which life taught them.

At the beginning of his work, Ben Sira sets out his basic principle for his readers: "If you desire wisdom, keep the commandments" (1:26). In practice, Wisdom and the Law have become one, and

opponents: "honor and praise," "happiness, joy and a long life," "well-being and flourishing health," and, not least, an "abiding remembrance after death" (39:9–11). Ben Sira's work is shot through with a firm connection between human action and divine retribution that gives it its polemic force.⁵⁶ While, in Proverbs, action and consequence are to some extent directly related, in Sirach God is the one who initiates and carries out punishment "the Lord alone will be declared righteous" (Sir 18:2).⁵⁷

Torah Becomes the Object of Reflection

Keeping in mind that Sirach is the work of a wisdom writer, Ben Sira's description of himself—or of the generic wisdom teacher—shows that the Torah itself has become the object of reflection for the wisdom writers. Thus Wisdom identified with the Torah is integral to wisdom teaching and writing.

For Ben Sira, personified Wisdom and Torah are inseparable and become a unity in Israel. It is possible that Ben Sira, who was living in Jerusalem at a time when Judaism encountered Hellenism, would have sought to defend the patrimony of Israel by showing its grandeur and long-standing credentials. While Sirach 24 does not exhibit any specific examples of anti-Hellenism, or censure of Hellenistic teachings or practices (no reference to Hellenism appears—surely

Ben Sira expresses this by putting the great hymn of Wisdom—Sirach 24, in which this fusion is achieved—in the center of his work. With this step, Wisdom becomes the exclusive gift of God to Israel. This provided the possibility of rejecting an alien, autonomous ideal of wisdom that refused any association with the Law, which for Ben Sira would be idolatry. Accordingly, he warns against false "striving for wisdom" (3:21–24). He takes up earlier ideas but modifies them, and he does so to gain a contemporary starting point for his argument. Transgression of the Law and apostasy bring certain punishment from God in this life, while fear of God and obedience to the Law lead to all the good things which are worth striving for, even to his

a case of a deliberate ignoring of a movement that was so widespread and powerful), he does laud Judaism's ancient heritage.⁵⁸ In chapter 24, Ben Sira illustrates, develops, and enriches the figure of personified Wisdom identified with the Torah by demonstrating the coherence of these two arms of Israel's sacred traditions. He enhances Israel's heritage for the Jews by showing that the Torah can legitimately be understood and accepted in a wisdom setting. The people of Israel must not lose faith in the Torah or regard their wisdom as in any way inferior to that of the Hellenists, but they are to treasure Wisdom/Torah as a total answer to those who do not know or appreciate the sacred traditions of Judaism.

In Sirach, the Torah is perceived as the expression of two of the author's deep convictions on the subject of Wisdom. In one sense he insists on the tent as the cornerstone from which Wisdom shines. He may be applying to Wisdom what Isa 2:3 and Mic 4:2 say of the Torah, "For from Zion will come the Torah and from Jerusalem the Word of YHWH." The Torah is not a simple code of laws, but the privileged expression of Wisdom coming to dwell with human beings. Ben Sira perceives in the Torah the revelation of God present to his people, of which the Temple is the location par excellence. A dual movement of the concentration and expansion of

Wisdom pervades the structure of Sirach 24 as illustrated in "From the mouth of the Most High I came forth, and mistlike covered the earth," which is a reinterpretation of Gen 2:6 "as a stream rising from the earth and watering the whole face of the ground," thus confirming Wisdom as the element which ensures the vitality and fruitfulness of the Torah.

Ben Sira draws attention specifically to the role of Wisdom in creation by having Wisdom proclaim, "Before the ages, from the first, he created me, and through the ages I shall not cease to be."

Wisdom/Torah Extend the Horizons of Israelite Faith

Ben Sira draws attention specifically to the role of Wisdom in creation in Sir 24:9 by having Wisdom proclaim, "Before the ages, from the first, he created me, and through the ages I shall not cease to be" (cf. Prov 8:23). In this, she is distinct from God, her Creator, and, while sharing the state of a creature with the rest of creation, she is unique in being the first of creation—"before the ages"—and thus different from everything created after her.⁵⁹ Sir 24:3 describes the origin of Wisdom by allusion to Gen 1:1–3, "Wisdom came out of the mouth of God." Here Wisdom is depicted as the first creative word in the

priestly version of the creation.⁶⁰ In her hymn of self-praise, Wisdom is commanded by God to "pitch her tent" in Israel,⁶¹ and becomes identified with the Temple service and the Law of Moses. The image of creation by word negates any view of the Creator as a *deus absconditus*, but rather portrays a God who is intimately involved with creation, and as one who establishes order in creation. Fur-

thermore, the image of God as Creator by word invalidates any view of God as capricious.

Sirach 24 understood God as speaking through Wisdom/Torah, which is the embodiment of the creative, life-giving word of the Creator. Ben Sira initiates this new departure for wisdom thought, by bringing into harmony the twin notions of Torah and Wisdom as the means by which the horizons of Israelite faith are extended. Through a series of parallels, Wisdom—the first creation—is shown to be one with the Torah—"the book of the Most High's covenant"—which also highlights creation by YHWH. In Sirach, we see a transformation of the prophet-like Wisdom figure of Proverbs into a Wisdom figure

identified with the Torah. Divine wisdom exists in Israel in concrete form in the Torah, which is Israel's Wisdom before the nations of the world and is in essence a restatement of its election.

All this is the book of the covenant of the Most High God, the law which Moses commanded us, as an inheritance for the congregations of Jacob (Sir 24:23).⁶²

All the preceding statements are included in the "all"

faithful to the Torah. While the old mythological notion that Wisdom sought a dwelling place on Earth in vain and in disappointment returned to her heavenly dwelling was rescinded, Ben Sira assures his readers that Wisdom has found her abiding place on Earth in the Torah, which was entrusted to Israel alone. Whether Ben Sira was the first to make this momentous identification, or whether he took it over from elsewhere is im-

nounced that God instructed her to pitch her tent in Israel and dwell among the people.

Ben Sira makes Wisdom and Torah inseparable (24:8–12, 23; 12:23).⁶³ Confronting us here is a question about whether Wisdom flowed into Torah or Torah into Wisdom, and whether the wisdom authors and Deuteronomists were the same. Wisdom's relationship to the Torah in Sirach must be understood against the background of confusion and assimilation of Judaism by Hellenism. Some consideration must be given to the effects on Judaism of living in a predominantly Hellenistic society. Clearly, Jewish thought was greatly influenced by its Hellenistic environment. Ben Sira reinterprets Israelite tradition in language that recalls and highlights its unique history and development. He employs enduring Israelite themes, images, and metaphors to refashion the Wisdom figure. Such reinterpretation enabled the Jewish people to remain faithful to and to recover their Jewish heritage when it was in danger of being eroded and assimilated by the prevailing Hellenistic culture.

A simple, yet astute, logic underlies the move to identify Wisdom and Torah. Wisdom and Torah were both the divine way of life; it followed inevitably that they were the same, as Ben Sira makes clear by placing this teaching in the center of his composition. Wisdom, as the Torah itself, is the means by which God is

Ben Sira reinterprets Israelite tradition in language that recalls and highlights its unique history . . . Such reinterpretation enabled the Jewish people to remain faithful to and to recover their Jewish heritage when it was in danger.

of v. 23a. In this way, the many-layered conception of cosmic wisdom was indissolubly associated with the history of Israel, and, conversely, the Law which was attacked in Jerusalem and may have become a source of embarrassment for some Jews in the time of Ben Sira was given a historical and a rational basis. Sirach 24 focuses on the uniqueness of the Jewish heritage as expressed in personified Wisdom.

Torah Locates Wisdom in Israel's History

Clearly, in both passages, universal wisdom becomes the possession of the people of Israel and ultimately of those

possible to discover. However it came about, it marks the climax in the composition of Sirach's writing that has come down to us. It seems likely that this result of a lifetime's work may also have been a presentation of ideas about Wisdom that was new.

At the climax of Wisdom's song, the author of Sirach makes an unabashed and unparalleled identification of Wisdom as the book of the covenant of the Most High (Sir 24:23; cf. Bar 3:9–4:3). Thus, universal Wisdom is specifically connected with the history of Israel and its covenant law. This, of course, is but emphasizing what Wisdom herself declared when she an-

revealed to human beings, while they, on the other hand, achieve communion with God by means of the Torah, and equally by means of Wisdom. In Sirach, this identification becomes complete with the figure of Wisdom quoting Deut 33:4 and applying the verse to herself (Sir 24:23). Ben Sira, in making Wisdom identical with the Mosaic law, declares her to be a divine gift, rather than a human acquisition, and thus makes Israelite Wisdom superior to Hellenic wisdom.



Notes

1. A. Di Lella, "The Wisdom of Ben Sira: Resources and Recent Research" in *Currents in Research: Biblical Studies* Vol. 4 (1996): 161–181, provides a valuable collection of information about resources and recent research, along with his own critical reflections on some of these studies.
2. Ben Sira's grandson writes in his prologue to the Greek translation: "so my grandfather Jesus [Ben Sira], who had devoted himself especially to the reading of the Law and the Prophets and the other books of our ancestors, and had acquired considerable proficiency in them, was himself also led to write something pertaining to instruction and wisdom" (Sir Prologue NRSV).
3. Rickenbacher, *Weisheitsperikopen* (1973): 118–120; but commentators disagree on the question of Wisdom's location in these verses.
4. Spicq, *L'Ecclésiastique*, 684–685; Bonnard, *La Sagesse en personne*, 69; Pie Y Ninot, *La Palabra de Dios*, 176–177.
5. In Job 22:14, God journeys through the vault of heaven.
6. This connection is rejected by Larcher, *Études* (1969): 342.
7. For the state of the question, see C. Westermann, *Genesis*, BK 4 (1970): 273–275; J. Lévêque, *Job et son Dieu*, ÉBib (Paris, 1970): 588.
8. Isaiah teaches clearly that the word of God exercises a role in the creative act (Isa 55:11), and Sir 42:15 takes this view while Sir 24:3a is not explicit.
9. Larcher refuses, correctly I believe, to see in Sir 24:6b the verb *UÖÖR* in the sense of "to create."
10. Sir 24:7 describes the people and the nations mentioned in the preceding verse.
11. Wisdom's assertion in Prov 8:22 that she was created before all else is echoed here.
12. Totality or unity is often expressed by the use of extremes.
13. H. Gese, "Die Weisheit, der Menschensohn und die Ursprünge der Christologie als konsequente Entfaltung der biblischen Theologie" in *Alttestamentliche Studien* (Tübingen, 1991): 218–248, esp. 226–228.
14. See Ps 92:13; Num 24:6; Cant 5:15.
15. Sir 50:10.
16. Ps 133:3; Cant 4:8.
17. 2 Chr 20:2; Josephus, *Antiquities*, xiv 4, 1.
18. Sir 39:13; A. Vaccari, "'Quasi plantatio rosae in Iericho' (Eccli 24:18)" VD 3 (1923): 289–94.
19. Josh 10:40; 12:8.
20. See Gen 30:37 and Ezek 31:8 for the two other references to the plane tree.
21. Sir 39:13; Ps 1:3; Jer 17:8.
22. Gilbert, "L'Éloge" (1974): 332.
23. Exod 30:23, 34 treat of the making of chrism and incense, and both commodities appear again in Exod 37:29 [LXX 38:25].
24. Chrism according to Exod 30:23–24 (LXX) consists of "liquid/choice myrrh," "sweet-smelling cinnamon," "aromatic cane," "cassia," and "olive oil." Ben Sira seems to refer to this text in 24:15ab.
25. Num 16:6–7, 17–35; 2 Chr 26:16–19. The pleasant smell of incense is referred to in Prov 27:9; Cant 3:6.
26. Judg 6:11, in which the angel of YHWH speaks with Gideon under the terebinth.
27. Isa 1:29; 57:5; Hos 4:13.
28. This expression also appears in Ps 84 (83) to describe the gifts of YHWH to his faithful who come to the Temple.
29. Similar fruits are alluded to in Prov 3:16 "Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honor," and Prov 8:18 "Riches and honor are with me, enduring wealth and prosperity." Cf. Sir 4:21b; Prov 8:21.
30. Gilbert, "L'Éloge" (1974): 330.
31. Cf. A. Feuillet, *Thèmes bibliques majeurs du discours sur le pain de vie* (John 6), in *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 82 (1960): 814–819; 918–922; Sir 1:16–17; 6:19.
32. Isaiah turned to an old tradition and adapted it in a radical and creative way to give hope to the people of Israel.
33. The images in 24:20 resemble Sir 49:1. Other liturgical references occur in Sir 35:9; 38:11; 45:16.

These comparisons suggest that Sirach is invoking the place of memory in the cult. Another aspect of memory emphasized by Sirach is the memory of the former acts of God (42:15); of illustrious men: Moses (39:9; 48:8-9; 45:1); Judg 46:11. Sirach also invites his readers to reflect on the last hour of life. Once (Sir 15:8), it is a question of remembering with Wisdom (Sir 15:8); another time it is to remember the commandments and the covenant (Sir 28:7). Cf. Rickenbacher, *Weisheitsperikopen*, 164-165.

34. Sir 24:20 is probably an inclusion antithetical to 23:26 "She will leave an accursed memory; her disgrace will never be blotted out," said of the memory of the adulterous woman who would be cursed.
35. Sir 6:18-38; Prov 8:4-10, 32-36; 9:4-6, 11.
36. Cf. Ps 19:11, where the "ordinances of YHWH" are said to be sweeter than syrup or honey from the comb"; see also Ps 119:103; Prov 16:24; 24:13-14.
37. John 4:14; 6:35.
38. Gilbert, "L'Éloge" (1974): 336-338, discusses various readings of this stanza; Skehan, *CBQ* 41 (1979): 365-379; AB 37 (1987): 336.
39. G.T. Sheppard, "Wisdom and Torah: The Interpretation of Deuteronomy Underlying Sirach 24:23," in G. A. Tuttle, ed. *Biblical and Near Eastern Studies* (Grand Rapids, 1978): 166-178.
40. Cf. Von Rad, *Wisdom* (1972): 246; Marböck, *Weisheit* (1971): 81-96; Sheppard describes Sir 24:1-22 as "plainly a recital of the history of Wisdom who resides in Israel as the Torah" *Wisdom* (1990): 61.
41. Interestingly, the discourse on Wisdom in Sir 24:3-22, is devoid of legalistic considerations.
42. Di Lella, *Wisdom* (1987): 336, says: "The Torah, like Wisdom in v. 3, is perceived as a spirit."
43. The Pishon was the first of the four rivers of Paradise to branch from the river in Eden (Gen 2:11).
44. The Tigris was the third branch river out of Eden (Gen 2:10-15)
45. The Euphrates was the fourth branch river out of Eden (Gen 10-15).
46. The Gihon was the second river to branch from the river in Eden and is identified with the Nile in the LXX of Jer 2:18. Cf. Gen 2:13.
47. Di Lella, *Wisdom* (1987): 336-7.
48. As G. Lambert notes in "The drama of the garden of Eden," *Nouvelle Revue Théologique*, 76 (1954): 925.
49. In the Masoretic Text, the "river" of Egypt is the Nile.
50. Cf. Isa 54:2-3.
51. Smend, *Die Weisheit* (1906): 224; Di Lella, *Wisdom* (1987): 330-338.
52. Gilbert, "L'Éloge" (1971): 336-338, notes that in the Syriac version, it is said to be prophecy. This view of Wisdom is also explicit in Sir 7:7; 8:21; 9:17-18.
53. Sir 3:20-22 focuses on humility and the curbing of curiosity, while Sir 39:1-3 uses similar terminology, but emphasizes that the wisdom teacher studies the wisdom of all the ancients.
54. Smend (1907), Duesberg (19) Rickenbacher (1973) using the Syriac version translated Sir 24:30: "And I, I am like an irrigation canal, like a tributary/arm of water watering the garden."
55. *Das Buch Jesus Sirach*, 205; followed by Marböck 59.
56. Hengel, *Judaism* (1974): 143.
57. *Ibid.*, 145.
58. The lauding of Judaism's claim to a grander, better, and more ancient heritage than that of Hellenism can be seen clearly in Sirach 44-50 in the "Praise of Israel's great ancestors" where there is much implied denigration of Hellenism and all its values.
59. An interesting parallel is the chiasmus in Sir 24:8ab.
60. The Latin version adds two further lines to 24:3a: "Born from the beginning, before all creation, I made the sun rise and the light," and thus attributes creative activity to Wisdom.
61. Whether "Israel" here means the people or the land of Israel is unclear. I opt for the people in the land, as Jerusalem and the Temple are mentioned also in this hymn.
62. G. F. Moore (1930): 264, n. 1, notes the extreme improbability that Sir 24:23 is a later interpolation, as W. L. Knox, (1939) assumes.
63. J. L. Crenshaw, "Sirach" in *HBC* (1988): 837, claims that these were irreconcilable traditions.

Strands of Celtic Spirituality in the Cloak of Catherine McAuley

Julie Upton, R.S.M.

THIS ESSAY HAS ITS ORIGINS in my growing interest in Celtic spirituality, in an attentiveness to our corporate commitment "to act in harmony and interdependence with all creation," and in an on-going conversation the Sisters and Associates in the Mercy Association in Scripture and Theology [MAST] have been having for the last ten years about Catherine McAuley: how she lived, what she read, and the ways she prayed.¹ One of the essays I presented as part of that conversation, "Echoes of Celtic Christianity in the Life and Work of Catherine McAuley," was previously published in *The MAST Journal*.² Since the publication of that work, I have continued to read and reflect both on recent works in the field of Celtic Spirituality and the works of our own Sisters as they dig around in our historical roots. I continue to be grateful to the historians and McAuley scholars among us, especially Mary Daly, R.S.M.,³ Mary Celeste Rouleau, R.S.M.,⁴ and Mary C. Sullivan, R.S.M.,⁵ for their extensive contributions to our experience and understanding of Catherine.

As I have said before, I come to the circle of conversation not as a historian, but as a systematic theologian and daughter of Catherine

McAuley. While the historian focuses on facts, the theologian characteristically wanders off listening to echoes or picking up strands of conversation here and there.

Only by close examination will we see the strands of Celtic spirituality woven into the fabric of Mercy life.

In my previous work, I used the term "echo" very deliberately. Echoes are faint, soft, and fuzzy. They are not heard as much as suspected, and only when you suspect them do you actually listen for them. Even then, it is still difficult to pinpoint the echo's source. As sound grows from its source, it expands, with the effect of surrounding the hearer. In order to discover the source of the sound, you must both look carefully and listen intently.

Similarly, I am using the metaphor of "strand" very deliberately. Strands are wispy, if you will. When you examine the weave of a cloth closely, you see that there are many different-colored strands. The shawl that you were so sure was lavender, upon closer examination you now see is woven of blue, green, and red. Only by such close examination will we

see the strands of Celtic spirituality woven into the fabric of Mercy life.

There will follow the inevitable question, "Is it one strand of Celtic spirituality or

are there actually several strands?" That, however, is not the question under consideration here, nor will I argue for how thick or sturdy are the strands of Celtic Spirituality I will pull at. Rather, I will begin by explaining what is meant by the term Celtic Christianity and presenting a few elements of a specific type of spirituality that took shape in Ireland. I will then turn to Catherine's life and work, and invite you to examine some of the strands that I see. All this, I hope, will present us with some possibilities for understanding ourselves, the mission of mercy, and our tradition differently as we see ourselves now wrapped in Mother McAuley's many-colored cloak. Perhaps then we will also come to see a newer, older way "to act in harmony and interdependence with all creation."

Celtic Christianity

During what is pejoratively called the Dark Ages, a different kind of Christianity flourished in the Celtic lands, especially in Ireland. In the mid-fifth century,⁶ when St. Patrick was on his mission to Christianize Ireland, the Roman Empire was crumbling, and the barbarians were overrunning Europe. Beyond the pale of Roman influence, Christianity became inculturated in Ireland. The gospel message did not change, but it was ignited by a Celtic fire⁷ with the result that the Chris-

fortresses, where there were no cities, towns, or even villages.⁹ More compatible to the simple, agrarian life of Ireland was the monastic society indigenous to the Syrian and Egyptian desert, with abbots and abbesses as local religious leaders rather than bishops sent as envoys by Rome. Nowhere is this difference more obvious than in church buildings. Compare the huge Roman basilica St. Mary Major, for example, with the humble stone chapel St. Kevin's Kitchen at Glendalough, County Wicklow, which both date from about the same period, and

to men and had similar legal rights, so it was almost axiomatic that the Celtic church would encourage the leadership of women. Since tribal leadership was spiritual rather than temporal, Druidic leaders functioned in a shamanic role within the tribe. Both men and women were mediators, knowers, and wisdom figures. Some specialized as judges, prophets, teachers, or poets, with no one person filling all these roles.¹⁰

There were also theological differences between the Roman and Celtic Church as well. They did not agree on the dating of Easter, for example. Other issues which separated the two churches were tonsure, celebration of the Sabbath on Saturday, communion under both kinds, failure to enforce clerical celibacy, and indications that women functioned as regional deaconesses.¹¹ However, what really separated the two, although not articulated at the time, was a matter of ethos. The Celts were, at root, a tribal people, and that in itself seemed to threaten the Roman Church. While bishops had ecclesiastical jurisdiction, the abbots or abbesses had the actual power, functioning as tribal chiefs. Celtic monastic settlements, as we will discuss later, had a large lay, non-celibate, family population, with leadership handed down through kinship lines. Autonomy and individuality were its hallmarks.¹²

The Church of Rome, as you might imagine, was not

It was pagan Celtic belief that women were equal to men and had similar legal rights, so it was almost axiomatic that the Celtic church would encourage the leadership of women.

tian faith burned differently in the hearts and lives of the Celtic people.⁸ A brief look at church organization, leadership, and theology will give you a sense of the difference involved.

The mission to Ireland came from Gaul, which was essentially an urban church. Influenced by the Roman idea of political structure, the continental church took shape around major cities and towns, under the leadership of a bishop. That form of ecclesial organization did not adapt well to a land of scattered farms and hilltop

you will have a good idea of the significant difference between these two understandings of "church."

A similar distinction can also be seen in the understanding of leadership. Rather than being rejected by the Celtic Church, the pagan Druid religion continued to be respected, and many of its ideas, attitudes, symbols, and rituals were even absorbed into Celtic Christianity over time. This was most evidenced in the role of women and the pattern of ministry which developed in Ireland. It was pagan Celtic belief that women were equal

well disposed to these differences, but the Celtic Church at that time had a wide sphere of influence. During the Dark Ages, it was the Celtic Church that kept learning alive, and monastic settlements were noted as important schools and centers of learning.¹³ Celtic missionaries spread over England even more widely than continental missionaries from the south. By the mid sixth-century, however, following the death of several important abbots from plague and the appointment of the first native Englishman as archbishop of Canterbury in 653, the sphere of Roman influence was strengthened. The Celtic fire was "officially" extinguished in 664 AD at the Synod of Whitby, where the Celtic Church was suppressed, or brought into line with Rome, depending on your way of seeing the events of that time.¹⁴

Remember, though, that fires can be very tricky. While the Celtic Church as such ceased to exist at the Synod of Whitby, embers of that Celtic fire still burned unsuspected, surviving in the spirituality of the people. It is inaccurate, in fact, to speak of Celtic spirituality in the past tense. Although some scholars refer to Celtic spirituality as existing only in the remote past, assuming that it ceased to exist somewhere between the Dark Ages and the early Middle Ages, it is very much a present reality. As Esther de Waal has taken care to note, Celtic

spirituality is not primitive, but primal.¹⁵

The Survival of Celtic Spirituality

"Spirituality" is a term that is often used unreflectively today, which can leave one confused about its precise meaning. Before listing any of the characteristics of Celtic spirituality, therefore, let me give you my framework for discussing spirituality in general. In

While the Celtic Church as such ceased to exist at the Synod of Whitby, embers of that Celtic fire still burned unsuspected, surviving in the spirituality of the people.

its broadest sense, I understand "spirituality" as the meaning system one develops in order to understand one's self, one's relationship with God, other people, and creation, and a way of making sense out of what happens within and around one. As Edward C. Sellner has written, spirituality "is about the way we live and interpret the world and the sacred mystery that surrounds us."¹⁶ Spirituality, therefore, is not limited to how we pray or worship, but is reflected in how we work and play, live, and love.

The rapidly growing corpus of literature on Celtic Spirituality¹⁷ lists a dozen or more characteristics evidenced by the people we call Celts. In "Echoes," I dealt with seven

of them.¹⁸ In this essay, I want to pull at three—what I call the monastic, the imaginal, and the artistic—before examining how these strands are woven into a spirituality that impels us "to act in harmony and interdependence with all creation."

Monastic Strand

Celtic Christianity—indeed the origins of Christianity in all of Britain—was essentially

monastic. Now before visions of a huge complex of Gothic buildings rises up before you, let me remind you of the peaceful Valley of the Two Lakes we know as Glendalough. That is the kind of monastic settlement we are discussing. Ordinary folk—a large lay, non-celibate, family population living in the surrounding area who formed part of the monastic settlement—learned their way of prayer from the monasteries. As a result, they learned that there was no separation between praying and living, for prayer and work flowed into and out of each other. They were expected to pray the daily offices, to follow a liturgical life shaped by a regular, ordered rhythm—yearly, seasonal, and daily.¹⁹

Monastic life, as it came to be among the Celtic peoples, was particularly influenced by Martin of Tours. Bishop of Tours (371 CE), Martin was the first Westerner to become influenced by the Eastern monks. He founded a monastery, Marmoutier—literally meaning “the place of the big family.” There, according to Michael Mitton, the Scottish Ninian was profoundly influenced, and the story of the Celtic Church in Britain has its origin, igniting the Celtic fire.²⁰ Martinian monasticism, exported to Ireland, did not produce well-organized

monasticism today was not simply a way of life for a small group of ascetics. In some form or other, it was *the* way of being Church for Celtic Britain.

We see a natural flow between the active and contemplative in the writings of Catherine McAuley. In “The Spirit of the Institute” Catherine shows us the fiber of her spirituality—faithful attention to the word of God. It is the same attentiveness we come to see in Jesus as we read the Gospels. Not only did he regularly go apart to pray, but he continually referred to the rela-

animation which alone could enable us to persevere in the meritorious obligations of our state. God . . . says “attend to thyself.”²²

We must, in the midst of the rudeness, impiety, and impatience which we shall witness, preserve meekness, piety, and unwearied patience. But in order to do this, we must prepare by application to spiritual exercises: prayer, examen, lecture, penance, and self-denial. From each of these, we draw new aid and the grace of Jesus Christ, which will accompany us in all we undertake with a pure intention of pleasing Him alone.²³

As recorded in “The Life of Catherine McAuley” by Mary Clare Moore (Bermondsey Manuscript) we read that:

Each hour of the day had its allotted duties. They rose early, and regular devout exercises of prayer and spiritual reading were practiced. Although these were of some continuance, they did not satisfy the devotion of our pious Founder, who besides private meditations used to rise at an earlier hour than the rest, with one or two of the juniors, to say the whole of her favourite Psalter, and read some spiritual book.²⁴

And Clare Moore concludes by stating that Catherine McAuley taught the Sisters to love the hidden life, laboring on silently for God alone . . .²⁵

The importance of pilgrimage and journey in the Celtic tradition, balanced with a strong sense of place, are sentiments that are very much in tune with the experience of Mercy tradition and temper of

It is important to note that what we might call monasticism today was not simply a way of life for a small group of ascetics. In some form or other, it was *the* way of being Church for Celtic Britain.

communities with a detailed rule under the strong authority of an abbot. Rather, it led to relatively loose gatherings of like-minded people. We find no evidence of huge complexes—merely an aggregation of buildings grouped fairly haphazardly within a boundary wall.²¹

Furthermore, Martin and his monks were not the purely contemplative kind of monks we might come to expect. On the contrary, they actively engaged in the work of evangelization.

It is important to note that what we might call

tionship he had with the Father. We see this most poetically in the Gospel according to John, but it shines through the other accounts as well. It is the “balanced life” which so much of the self-help literature of today expounds.

Catherine says:

. . . we must consider the time and exertion which we employ for the relief and instruction of the poor and ignorant as most conducive to our own advancement in perfection, and the time given to prayer and all other pious exercises, etc., we must consider as employed to obtain the grace, strength, and

our own age.²⁶ While individuals and groups of ascetics believed that one particular location "in the sacred landscape of the world ... was particularly potent for their spiritual destiny," they also lived as people on a journey seeking the place of their resurrection, which they understood to be their "deepest and truest self in Christ."²⁷

Did Catherine McAuley walk the pilgrim way in Glendalough on one of her trips to Carlow or join a band of pilgrims to climb Croagh Patrick on her visit to Westport? We will probably never know the answer to those questions this side of the grave. Although she did not use the language of one who was seeking her spiritual destiny or the place of resurrection, she seemed to live with that awareness.

Catherine's sense of balance and the image of the seesaw helped me to understand that balance is primarily a matter of being centered and rooted. Catherine McAuley was surely centered in God and rooted in the gospel, reminding us ever so gently that "we have one solid comfort amidst this little tripping about: our hearts can always be in the same place, centered in God, for whom alone we go forward or stay back."²⁸

That sense of balance is reflected well in the "daily distribution of time,"²⁹ where we see that the Sisters spent as much time in contemplation as they did in action. Catherine knew that the temptation

would always be for us to go to one extreme or the other. In her day, the temptation was the extreme of appropriating the ascetical practices of cloistered communities: fasting, hair shirts, self-flagellation, etc. She rightly recognized that these could diminish the quality of service one might render in the mission of mercy. Instead, she encouraged an asceticism of compassion among the Sisters.³⁰

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contemplation as they did in action.
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the other.

Hers was hardly a smooth passage through this world, and in establishing the Institute of Mercy, there were many rugged sections of road for Catherine. There were problems with ecclesiastical authorities, both at home and in Rome, as well as struggles with sickness and death in her family and among the Sisters. Catherine never lost hope or abandoned the vision, but was always reminding her associates that "without the Cross the real Crown cannot come. Some great thing which He designs to accomplish would have been too much without a little bitter in the cup. Bless and love the fatherly Hand which has hurt you. He will come with both Hands filled with favours and blessings."³¹

"Turn what you can into a jest!" "Dance every evening." Such balanced advice abounds in Mother McAuley's letters, along with amusing and whimsical poetry, as it does in the life stories and sayings of the other Celtic saints.

Even in physical surroundings, Catherine notes the importance of balance. In giving the details of the Limerick foundation she writes:

A very nice old convent, enclosed by the walls of an abbey: a beautiful ruin . . . A very large weeping ash hanging over the Grace; it looks delightful and excites meditation of the most consoling kind. A very nice chapel and choir, good garden and extensive school rooms . . . the house is surrounded by trees, etc., walking round, and all enclosed with fine old walls entirely lined with ivy.³²

In describing new foundations, in general, Catherine usually makes reference to gardens and trees as necessary for restoring the spirit. In other contexts, she often evidences concern that a Sister might need an extended "change of air" before continuing her work.

Sometimes Catherine needed to be reminded of balance herself, as we read in a letter addressed to her from Andrew Fitzgerald, OP, president of Carlow College:

But you must sometimes think that you carry the treasures of God in a fragile vessel liable to break and chink, and requiring frequent repairs, to effect which you cannot have leisure amid the various intrusions of those immediately about you. Break away from them and come down to the calm, quiet residence of your children here. A few days with us will renovate mind and body, and send you home fresh for new toils. Remember God has given you charge of the health you employ in His service . . . Now, my dearest old friend, in unison with all here I earnestly beg of you to have compassion on yourself . . .³³

Imaginal Strand

This term "imaginal" is yet another example of theological jargon. It is used specifically to validate or legitimate an element of spirituality which some might otherwise regard as "imaginary." Noel Dermot O'Donoghue makes this distinction between the two. He writes, "an imaginary being or world is created by our free faculty of imagination . . .; the imaginal world, the *mundus imaginalis*, on the other hand, does claim precisely this: that it is a continuation or extension of the world of everyday perception."³⁴ More recently, the poet-theologian John O'Donoghue has described the

phenomenon more simply. He states that what scholars refer to as the "imaginal world" is an "interim world between the visible and the invisible . . . the world where the angels live."³⁵ However it is described or defined, I find evidence of this "strand" in the Celtic approach to God and to the Communion of Saints.

Celtic prayers demonstrate that the people related to a Godhead who is Trinity—not to a remote theological construct that is distant and inaccessible, but a three-personed God who knows, loves, supports, is close at hand, and actually present in their everyday lives. They have a wonderful sense of being embraced on all sides by God.³⁶ A vivid example of this is their "encircling prayers," a ritual, adapted from pre-Christian origins, that seems to have survived at least into the nineteenth century. In times of danger, people would draw a circle around themselves with the index finger of the right hand. They would point and turn round sunwise, praying to the Trinity to encircle and protect them.³⁷ Remember, even a night's sleep was often regarded as a danger for our ancestors:

*I am lying down tonight,
With Father, with Son,
With the Spirit of Truth,
Who shield me from harm.*

*I will not lie with evil,
Nor shall evil lie with me,
But I will lie down with God,
And God will lie down with me.*

*God and Christ and Spirit Holy,
And the cross of the nine white
angels
Be protecting me as Three and as
One,
From the top tablet of my face to
the soles of my feet.*

*Thou King of the sun and of glory,
Thou Jesu, Son of the Virgin
fragrant,
Keep Thou us from the glen of
tears,
And from the house of grief and
gloom,
Keep us from the glen of tears,
From the house of grief and
gloom.³⁸*

They accepted that two worlds came together at certain familiar places in the landscape, sometimes associated with traditionally sacred places, such as woodlands or wells.³⁹ Similarly, the Communion of Saints was not just an article of the creed; but a way of living.⁴⁰

As David Adam describes it,

... it was a very thin line that divides the saints triumphant from us on Earth. Those who witnessed before us are received up into glory and are very much alive. They are not men and women of the past, but sons and daughters of God, who are alive now and in the fullness of eternal life. The Communion of Saints is a reality to be experienced.⁴¹

There was an essential unity of all things so that, as Noel Dermot O'Donoghue says:

Not only was this world very close in a spiritual way, but it could shine through or otherwise impress itself on human perception. If one does not understand the nearness and apprehensibility of this

"other world" of the angels and saints there is no hope at all of understanding Celtic Christianity either in its marvelous flowering in the "Dark Ages" or in its pathetic and tenacious survival in what is left of that ancient faith and culture.⁴²

Artistic Strand

I regard the Celtic people as great artisans—whether the material be yarn, metal, stone, or pen and inks. The two images that come to me for this are the renowned high crosses of Ireland and the exquisite illuminations, not of the Book of Kells, but the enchanting work of Clare Augustine Moore.

High crosses often told scriptural stories, but more interesting to me is the braiding in the background. It is generally held that the plaitwork on these crosses symbolizes "the great cosmic loom of the universe." There are no loose ends, for the symbol is one of the continuity of the spirit throughout existence. The sustained tone or drone maintained behind the music of the bagpipes expresses the same idea. Furthermore, plaitwork is not always regular. By intentionally breaking some of the "threads" and joining them up in different ways, irregularities were produced. Still, the overall effect was pleasing. It could have been that such breaks in regular plaitwork may initially have been mistakes, but it is more likely that they were deliberately sculpted in order to imitate nature.

A flower, for example, may look attractive and symmetrical, yet not one of its petals is *exactly* identical with any other. The builders of medieval cathedrals likewise introduced slight imperfections in the dimensions, with the same end in view, yet their result is, like a flower, pleasing to the eye. The idea seems to be that perfection belongs to God alone.⁴³

We have evidence that Mother McAuley did loose patience with Clare Augustine Moore's painstaking work. However, she let her do it. For me, that is a powerful witness to the importance of the artisan in the community. At the same time, Catherine certainly took her time at writing poetry. Those verses took time to compose. We have a few of them in letters, but I often wonder how many others were discarded along the way?

Clare Augustine Moore's illuminated manuscripts, described as some of the finest examples of the medieval tradition of illuminations done in nineteenth-century Ireland, are displayed there along with many of her watercolors. Walk the halls of many of our motherhouses and you will find similar displays of the artistic works of the Sisters—photography, sculpture, paintings, quilts, afghans, etc. We do much more than pour soup!

Clothed in the Celtic Cloak of Mercy

"Are there any modern Celts today?" asks Timothy Joyce in *Celtic Christianity*. As I noted earlier, I agree with Esther DeWaal's conclusion that Celtic spirituality is primal, and that is what enables us to see its strands woven into our

"Are there any modern Celts today?"

I have always described the Sisters of Mercy as "earthy" women. Therefore, I would respond by saying that I find many modern Celts among the Sisters of Mercy today.

A visit to the Mercy International Center in Dublin, the global headquarters of the Sisters of Mercy,⁴⁴ will give you a glimpse of some of the magnificent artistic works of the Sisters of Mercy of the past and of the present. Sister

lives and mission today. It is fundamentally "earthy," if you will, and I have always described the Sisters of Mercy as "earthy" women. Therefore, I would respond to Joyce's question by saying that I find many modern Celts among

the Sisters of Mercy today. When I think back to my education in the spiritual traditions of Ignatius Loyola, Francis deSales or Alphonse Ligouri to name just a few, their writings and spirituality always struck me as being unremittingly cerebral. The work of Meister Eckhart and the Helfta "galaxy,"⁴⁵ by contrast, seemed to be more grounded in the world of everydayness. It is that blend of spirituality that makes me feel at home among the Celts.

Although I haven't traveled far and wide in the Mercy world, I have been privileged to spend some time in two of our early houses: the Convent of Mercy in Westport, County Mayo and St. Leo's Convent in Carlow. Both visits helped to shape my understanding and appreciation of Celtic spirituality not just as a phenomenon described in recent books, but as a reality lived by our Sisters in Catherine's day and our own.

If you look out the windows on the front of the house in Westport, for example, you can see Croagh Patrick rising in the background. This sacred mountain, where it is believed that St. Patrick spent forty nights in fasting and prayer to extract from God the promise that the Irish would never lose the Christian faith Patrick brought them, is a place of pilgrimage. Pilgrims climb the 2510 feet to the top where a chapel stands today. The mountain, formed of quartzite which breaks into sharp-edged stones, is often

climbed barefoot. The older Sisters at Westport told us of climbing to the peak years ago in rain-soaked habits.

More impressive than the religious aspects of the climb is the magnificent view of Clew Bay that lies below, "its inner waters cluttered by green teardrop islands, formed by a glacier millions of years ago."⁴⁶ To look up to that mountain each day is also to remember the perspective it gives—on life and faith as well as geography.

On the opposite side of the house is a much smaller hill, part of the convent property. At its top is a large crucifix—an ever-present reminder of who is at the source of our mission, "the humbled, abandoned Christ." A neighbor's sheep graze there, also serving as gentle reminders of the unity of creation in the hand of God.

Above the doorways and windows throughout the house are illuminations of short sayings from scripture or other wisdom sources. One that struck me in particular is that painted above the window that looks out on the community cemetery. It says simply "Eternity."

So close did I feel to our roots in Ireland that Catherine McAuley could have walked right through the door. Come to think of it, perhaps she does, in the guise of the wanderer (or tinker) who stops by the convent each morning for his coffee and egg, giving precise instructions on how these are to be prepared.

My reflections upon visiting St. Leo's Convent in Carlow were similar. I had written ahead to their archivist, Nessa Cullen, R.S.M. In my letter, I told her that, although I was interested in the historical records and artifacts at Carlow, I was actually more interested in walking the streets, breathing the air, and seeing the sights Catherine McAuley and Frances Warde did. Nessa obliged me completely!

My journal of that time reflects that the Sisters in Ireland seem to live closer to the mission, closer to the pulse of everyday life, than we do. I felt that pulse in the community room, the very parlor where Frances Warde began a school with twenty girls in 1837. I felt it as the Sisters talked about the "poor" they visited that day, and as Nessa walked with us around the city later that evening. When outside the refectory the next morning, on a windowsill in a tiny alcove, I saw a small book was open—*Thoughts from the Spiritual Conferences of Mother M. Catherine McAuley*—the pulse beat louder.

Lessons for Today

In his book, *Landscapes of the Sacred*, Belden Lane explores the thesis that the experiences of place and space profoundly shape our spirituality, and that our spirituality then structures our "landscape," or vision of place in the universe.⁴⁷ Throughout the book, he develops this sacramental understanding of place, taking

this impulse from Jose Ortega y Gasset who is credited with the saying, "Tell me the landscape in which you live and I will tell you who you are."⁴⁸

When we were celebrating the 150th Anniversary of the founding of our Congregation back in 1981, I remember the numerous articles that referred to the Sisters of Mercy as the "walking Sisters." For me, as I hope I have demonstrated in this essay, Celtic spirituality is a "walking spirituality," and therefore well suited to Sisters of Mercy. Ireland is our sacred landscape and it can shape us clear across the world. As I suggested earlier, my deeper reading into the original texts and recent studies of Celtic spirituality has enabled me to see a newer, older way "to act in harmony and interdependence with all creation."

Let me inject a word of caution, however. Celts of an earlier age had an obvious admiration, respect, and love of nature, but nature in its entirety. They did not portray nature as many of our consumer products do, or as St. Francis of Assisi did, celebrating only its benign side. Their poetry and prayers gives evidence that they were keenly aware of the dark side of nature, and prayed to be protected from its dark forces.⁴⁹ While we are only now beginning to discover the lessons the Celtic spiritual tradition has to teach, and perhaps recover some aspects of that

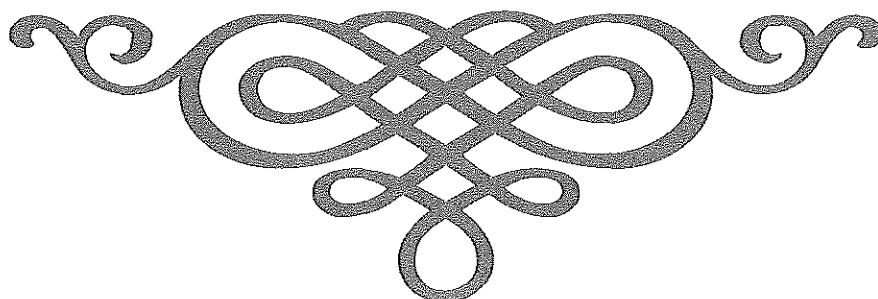
spirituality, it is important that we remember that the Celtic spiritual tradition will also have a dark side that informs us. All these threads—light and dark—are woven into the cloak we wear.



Notes

1. An earlier draft of this essay was presented at the New York Regional Community's conference, "Catherine McAuley: A Cloak of May Colors," September 20, 1997.
2. See Julia Upton, R.S.M., "Echoes of Celtic Christianity in the Life and Work of Catherine McAuley," *The MAST Journal* 4 (Fall 1993) 9–13.
3. See Mary Daly, R.S.M., "Catherine McAuley's Original Rule and Her Understanding of the Order of Mercy," *The MAST Journal* 3/1 (Fall 1992) 14–20.
4. See Mary Celeste Rouleau, R.S.M., "Reading the Future of Our Past: Processes for the Interpretation of Foundational Texts of Mercy," *The MAST Journal* 3/2 (Spring 1993) 1–6.
5. See Mary C. Sullivan, R.S.M., *Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995); "Comforting and Animating: The Generative Work of Catherine McAuley," *The MAST Journal* 3/1 (Fall 1992) 6–13.
6. Because we are dependent on an oral and not a written tradition for our information, there is a general lack of precision about people, places, and events. Be aware that the lines between fact and fiction often blur.
7. This vivid metaphor is used repeatedly by Robert Van de Weyer in his book *Celtic Fire: The Passionate Religious Vision of Ancient Britain and Ireland* (New York: Doubleday, 1990).
8. For a thorough historical discussion of this phenomenon, see Nora K. Chadwick, *The Age of the Saints in the Early Celtic Church* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961).
9. Van de Weyer, 5.
10. Caitlin Matthews, *The Celtic Tradition* (Rockport, MA: Element, 1991) 36–37. Although there has been dispute in scholarly circles on the place of women in Celtic society, the case is well argued in Peter Berresford Ellis, *Celtic Women: Women in Celtic Society and Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996).
11. Matthews, 96.
12. Christopher Bamford and William Parker Marsh, *Celtic Christianity: Ecology and Holiness* (New York: Lindisfarne Press, 1987) 25–26.
13. For a complete presentation, see Thomas Cahill, *How The Irish Saved Civilization: The Untold Story of Ireland's Heroic Role from the Fall of Rome to the Rise of Medieval Europe* (New York: Doubleday, 1995).
14. Margaret Deanesly, *A History of the Medieval Church 590–1500* (London: Methuen & Co., 1969) 46–48. For a more detailed presentation, see Clifford Stevens, "Saint Cuthbert: Crisis in Northumbria" in *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 24 (1989) 280–292.
15. See Esther de Waal, *Every Earthly Blessing: Celebrating a Spirituality of Creation* (Ann

- Arbor, MI: Servant Publications, 1992).
16. Edward C. Sellner, *Mentoring: The Ministry of Spiritual Kinship* (Notre Dame, Ave Maria Press, 1990) 18.
 17. See Esther DeWaal, *The Celtic Way of Prayer: The Recovery of the Religious Imagination* (New York: Doubleday, 1997); Timothy Joyce, *Celtic Christianity: A Sacred Tradition, A Vision of Hope* (New York: Orbis, 1998); Michael Mitton, *The Soul of Celtic Spirituality in the Lives of Its Saints* (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1996); John J. O'Riordain, CSSR, *The Music of What Happens: Celtic Spirituality—A View from the Inside* (Winona, MN: Saint Mary's, 1996); Philip Sheldrake, *Living Between Worlds: Place and Journey in Celtic Spirituality* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1995).
 18. These included a deep love and respect for the physical environment, the love of learning, an innate yearning to explore the unknown, a love of silence and of solitude, a unique understanding of time, an appreciation of ordinary life, and a strong belief in the value of kinship relations, particularly the spiritual ties of soul friends (*anamcharas*).
 19. DeWaal, *Celtic Way of Prayer*, 53.
 20. Mitton, 5.
 21. Sheldrake, 13.
 22. *The Correspondence of Catherine McAuley 1827–1841*, edited by Sister M. Angela Bolster (Cork: Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy, 1988). 242. [Hereafter referred to as *Letters*.]
 23. *Letters*, 243.
 24. Sullivan, 103.
 25. Sullivan, 110.
 26. Sheldrake 3.
 27. Michael Rodgers and Marcus Losack, *Glendalough: A Celtic Pilgrimage* (Dublin: Columba, 1996) 9.
 28. *Letters*, 178, 20 December 1840.
 29. See *Letters*, 162–163.
 30. See discussion in Joanna Regan, R.S.M., and Isabelle Keiss, R.S.M., *Tender Courage* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1988) 106–110.
 31. *Letters*, 126, 21 March 1840.
 32. *Letters*, 67, 12 October 1838.
 33. *Letters*, p. 146, 4 August 1940.
 34. Noel Dermot O'Donoghue, *The Mountain behind the Mountain: Aspects of the Celtic Tradition* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993) 32.
 35. John O'Donoghue, *Anam Cara* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997) 77.
 36. DeWaal, *The Celtic Way of Prayer*, 38–39, 70. See also Sheldrake, 78–79.
 37. Sheldrake, 9.
 38. "Sleep Consecration," in Alexander Carmichael *Carmina Gadelica* (New York: Lindisfarne Press, [1900] 1992) 58.
 39. Sheldrake, 30.
 40. O'Riordain, 54.
 41. David Adam, *The Cry of the Deer*, 75.
 42. O'Donoghue, 51.
 43. Derek Bryce, *The Symbolism of the Celtic Cross* (York Beach, Maine: Samuel Weiser, Inc., 1995), 60–61.
 44. You can take a virtual tour by visiting their homepage at: <http://www.mercy-international.org/tour.html>.
 45. The term Helfta "galaxy" is often used to characterize the women who lived and wrote around the Cistercian Monastery of Helfta [Germany] in the second half of the thirteenth century. Contemporaries of Julian of Norwich and Meister Eckhardt, these women include the Abbess Gertrude von Hackeborn, Gertrude the Great, Mechtilde von Hackeborn, and Mechthild von Magdeburg.
 46. Catharina Day, *Ireland* (London: Cadogan Books, 1991) 246.
 47. Belden Lane, *Landscapes of the Sacred: Geography and Narrative in American Spirituality* (New York: Paulist, 1988) ix.
 48. Ibid. 16.
 49. What I would describe as a more holistic approach to Celtic spirituality is best developed by Timothy Joyce in *Celtic Christianity*, previously cited.



Contributors

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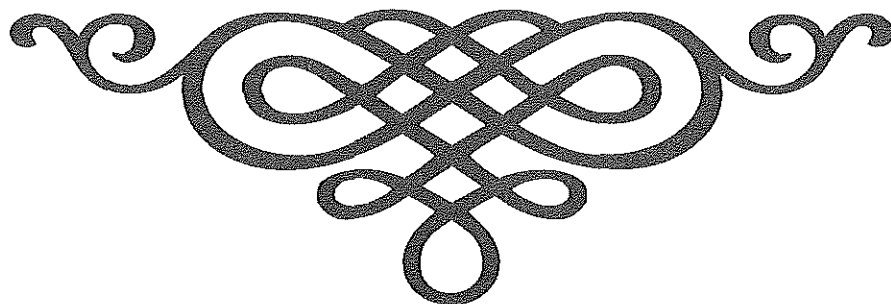
Alice M. Sinnott, R.S.M., a native of Wexford, Ireland, has been engaged in the New Zealand mission since the 1950s. She taught English and religion in secondary schools, and then for fifteen years lectured in biblical studies and religious education at Auckland College of Education. She holds an M.A. from Auckland University, an M.T.S from Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, and completed her D.Phil. from Oxford University in 1997. Her dissertation was "The Personification of Wisdom in the Old Testament." She has returned as a member of the theological faculty lecturing in First Testament at Auckland University.

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Christine Bucey Wilde, a Mercy Associate (Burlingame), has an M. A. from Northern Arizona University and a B.A. in physical sciences from Stanford. She has taught chemistry, physics, and earth sciences at Central Catholic High School in Modesto, CA for twenty-two years, and at Modesto Junior College for twelve years. Among several national awards for teaching, she was a Tandy Technology Scholar in 1992, a Department of Energy Teacher-Research Associate, and Rotary Teacher of the Year in 1997. She regularly lectures at state and national conventions on science education and has a life-long passion for astronomy.

Discussion Questions

1. (Bucey Wilde) If the earth and persons on it share the same atomic "stuff" as the great stars which exploded in the galaxy, how might this consciousness alter a "Jesus and I" spirituality?
2. (King) Which "sin against the environment" affects you the most personally? How are you seeking reconciliation for that sin?
3. (Ryan) "My own vineyards I had not looked after." What recovery of feminine possibilities does the image of the garden evoke for you personally, and for women as a group?
4. (McNamara) How do you expect that your ministry with the poor will contribute to ecological restoration and environmental renewal?
5. (Sinnott) Do you think women's spirituality would be different, if instead of deferring to male images for God as Father or Lord, women focused on alternative images for God as the woman Wisdom, source of creation, and personified Torah?
6. (Upton) If Mercy Sisters didn't appropriate the extremes of ascetical practices so that the quality of their mission of service would not be diminished, what does it mean that Catherine encouraged "an asceticism of compassion"?



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MERCY ASSOCIATION IN SCRIPTURE AND THEOLOGY

MAST, the Mercy Association in Scripture and Theology, met for the first time in June 1987 at Gwynedd-Mercy College in Gwynedd Valley, Pennsylvania. Called together by Eloise Rosenblatt, R. S. M. and Mary Ann Getty, twenty Mercy theologians and Scripture scholars from fourteen regional communities formally established the organization to provide a forum for dialogue and cooperation among Sisters of Mercy and associates. The stated purpose of the organization is to promote studies and research in Scripture, theology, and related fields; to support its members in scholarly pursuits through study, writing, teaching, and administration; and to provide a means for members to address current issues within the context of their related disciplines.

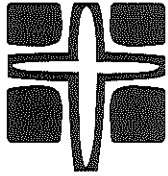
MAST has been meeting annually since then, usually in conjunction with the annual meeting of the Catholic Theological Society of America, and the organization now numbers fifty, with members living and working in Australia, Canada, the Caribbean, Central and South America, as well as in the United States. Julie Upton, R.S.M. currently serves as MAST's executive director. MAST will hold its annual meeting in Ottawa, June 7-10, 1998.

Members work on a variety of task forces related to their scholarly discipline. Present task forces include: Scripture, healthcare ethics, and spirituality. In addition, the members seek to be of service to the Institute by providing a forum for on-going theological education.

Membership dues are \$20 per year, payable to Marie Michele Donnelly, R. S. M., MAST treasurer, Convent of Mercy, 515 Montgomery Ave., Merion Station, PA 19066.

If you would like to be on the mailing list, call or write: Julia Upton, R. S. M., Executive Director, St. John's University, 8000 Utopia Parkway, Jamaica, NY 11439 (718) 990-1861, or email to Uptonj@stjohns.edu.

Since 1991, *The MAST Journal* has been published three times a year. Members of the organization serve on the journal's editorial board on a rotating basis, and several members have taken responsibility over the years to edit individual issues. Maryanne Stevens, R. S. M., was the founding editor of the journal, and Eloise Rosenblatt, R. S. M., currently serves in that capacity.



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