What on Earth Is More Important?

Sustainability
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On the Cover

A view across Waldo Lake in Oregon’s Cascade Mountains. Over the centuries, ancient glaciers carved out a bowl that collected the lake’s pristine waters, covering 10 square miles. On a clear day, you can see to depths of 100 feet.
Photo by Jennifer Brandlon

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What is our part in finding solutions?

Sustainability was the theme of our Province Chapter last summer and, for us, it is more than the latest buzzword. Sustainability provides the lens through which we focus on choices that shape our common life, the choices that inform our common mission, and the choices that are essential for the common good. It is integral to our commitment to good stewardship of resources.

Pope Francis, in Laudato Si, tells us “Interdependence obliges us to think of one world with a common plan.” (no. 164). Interdependence was also a focus of our 2011 General Chapter and helps us think about how to engage in actions related to our corporate stands.

Our corporate stand on water reminds us that water is a sacred gift that connects all life. The drying of aquifers around the world threatens regions’ ability to sustain life. Climate change that melts ice caps, raises sea levels and reduces the habitat of wildlife challenges us to examine how we might become a more effective part of the solution at home and in our ministries for the sake of the common good.

In Laudato Si, Pope Francis presents us with a challenge when he says “Local individuals and groups can make a real difference. They are able to instill a greater sense of responsibility, a strong sense of community, a readiness to protect others, a spirit of creativity and a deep love for the land.” (no. 179). He goes on to remind us “All Christian communities have an important role to play in ecological education.” (no. 214). How will we, both corporately and individually, meet that challenge?

This issue of Voyage describes some approaches to meeting our responsibilities. We hope the contents inform and inspire, reinforcing our commitment to doing the best we can with what we have and who we are.
I love this picture of Earth taken from space. It represents one of our greatest technological achievements – the step out into space – but really this picture has a far deeper significance because, for the first time ever, we have seen ourselves, and the planet, from the outside and the view has changed everything.

In a real sense this image of Earth has become a religious icon for me – a sacred symbol of that which is holy and precious – because it elicits such profound feelings of awe and wonder, of oneness and connectedness, and of being a part of something so much greater. It speaks too of the ineffable beauty of Earth, of its increasing vulnerability and fragility, and brings home to me, in a way nothing else can, that we are one human family and one Earth community with a common destiny, as the Preamble to the Earth Charter so beautifully states.

For the early astronauts, the sight of the planet shining in the blackness of space was a profound religious experience. One of the astronauts who walked on the moon described his view of Earth as an experience of instant global consciousness. He said that when you are up there, you are no longer an American citizen or a Russian citizen. Suddenly all those boundaries disappear. You are a Planetary Citizen. Another astronaut wrote: The clear message of seeing ourselves from space is that Earth is a whole system and humanity, one of its many interdependent species. A regard for all of life as sacred becomes a practical as well as moral position when we see the critical role that all life plays in maintaining the system...If the next step in human evolution is to build a Planetary Civilization,
then what is most needed is the ability to see and deal with problems on a planetary level.

For our ancestors and for indigenous people worldwide, the natural world was alive and permeated with spirit. They lived in a Sacred Universe and virtually every notion they had about God was awakened and shaped by this beautiful world in which they lived. They experienced Earth as the Mother of all beings and habitually spoke of Mother Nature and Mother Earth. The natural world was a spiritual reality for them, and if they had a vivid and keen sense of the divine, it was only because they lived in the midst of such stupendous beauty and awesome magnificence. The Sacred Texts of our spiritual traditions also speak of the stupendous magnificence of Earth, of its overwhelming beauty and elegance, of its vast and diverse array of creatures and of the incredibly complex and interdependent weave of its ecosystems.

This notion that we live in a Sacred Universe, permeated with spirit and revelatory of God, seems like a strange one to mainstream Western culture, however, because we have been raised in a secular landscape, and have been taught to identify the sacred primarily with our churches and cathedrals. We have not been taught to identify the sacred with the natural world. In fact, for most of us today, the natural world has come to be viewed purely as a material reality, with no intrinsic value and no inherent worth. Its value for us is simply utilitarian, its worth coming only from the value we humans give it. Nature’s bounty and abundance are seen solely as commodities and natural resources that can be bought and sold, exploited and extracted, used and even abused if we humans so desire.

And, for many, it is this mentality that has brought us to the desperate state we find our world in, as this quote

1 Earth Prayers, edited by Elizabeth Roberts and Elias Amidon, p.37
from the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops indicates:

"God’s glory is revealed in the natural world, yet we humans are presently destroying creation. In this light, the ecological crisis is also a profoundly religious crisis. In destroying creation we are limiting our ability to know and love God. The ecological crisis is a moral crisis and the responsibility of everyone."

In 1967 historian Lynn White, Jr., wrote a provocative essay entitled “The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis” in which he blamed Christianity for the environmental crisis. Christianity, he said, with its emphasis on human salvation and dominion over nature, “made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects.” Because the “roots of our trouble are largely religious,” he claimed, “the remedy must also be essentially religious. We must rethink and re-feel our nature and our destiny.” (Lex Credendi, Lex Vivendi: a Response to Laudato Si, Sister Ilia Delio, 2015)

If this loss of our sense of Earth as Sacred is at the heart of the current environmental crisis, including the global climate crisis - and I believe it is - then a proper “rediscovery” of our beautiful Christian faith tradition may be the key to an eventual solution.

An Evolving Universe

"Humanity is part of a vast evolving universe. Earth, our home, is alive with a unique community of life. The forces of nature make existence a demanding and uncertain adventure, but Earth has provided the conditions essential to life’s evolution. (Preamble - The Earth Charter )"

Because we have seen the world as a purely material reality and only humans as spiritual beings, scientists have made enormous progress over the last few centuries, not only in learning Our Story – The Story of the Evolution of the Universe, but in coming to understand exactly how the universe works. It seems to me then, that in order for us to now move forward into a peaceful, sustainable, and mutually enhancing Earth-human future, with abundant life for all, we must learn about our past, and The Story of how this vast, evolving universe came to be, and how it continues to emerge into being.

The Universe burst into being some 14 billion years ago in The Initial Flaring Forth (The Big Bang). Over these billions and billions of years, it has evolved from pure energy, to matter, to life, to conscious life, and on to self-reflexive consciousness in us, the human species. As the universe continues to emerge into being through us, the questions we must ask ourselves are: How is this vast evolutionary process – how is this cosmic story, my story, our story - to move forward in our time? What has to happen within us (the consciousness of the universe), to enable the planet and all of life to flourish and continue to emerge into being?

Physicists sound like mystics when they tell us that every atom in the universe has an inner intelligence that is non-material and utterly unknowable. Physicists sound like mystics when they tell us that every atom in the universe has an inner intelligence that is non-material and utterly unknowable.² We have also learned that The Universe, over these 14 billion years of its emergence, has evolved on both the outer plane (materially, physically) and on the inner plane (psychically, spiritually). Teilhard de Chardin speaks of this when he says that to everything in nature there is what he calls the

²Earthspirit, Michael Dowd, p.14
**without and the within.** The **without** refers to that which follows the laws of physics and chemistry as we understand those laws, and is what we in western civilization accept as the only valid understanding of *what is* – which is the **material** aspect of things. But there is also the **within** in every aspect of nature – that free, spontaneous and conscious **withinness** of things that Teilhard refers to as the self-organizing tendency in nature.

Teilhard believed that the universe has been a **spiritual** process from the beginning, but that **spirit (consciousness)** – like everything else in the universe – is an **evolving and emerging** reality. He believed that **evolution is fundamentally psychic and spiritual in nature and that it is always leading to a rise in inwardness and growth in the spirit.**

Over this vast evolutionary journey, we humans have learned how to harness and tame the powers and energies that are at work in the **outer** world – on the material and physical plane. But, in order for this vast cosmic adventure to go forward into the future as God intends, evolution’s thrust from now on must be on the **inner** plane, in the evolution of our consciousness and in that deepening **within** that Teilhard so often referred to. It will be in the cultivation of that **inner** landscape, in the taming of our hearts, in the curbing of our appetites, and in the harnessing and cultivating of those vast psychic/spiritual powers of which we humans are capable – psychic/spiritual capacities for love and compassion, for solidarity and empathy, for forgiveness and reconciliation, for balance and restraint, for reverence and awe, for justice-making and peace-making, and for the sustainable living practices to which we are now being called.

It seems to me that the next evolutionary breakthrough – the next evolutionary leap – will be a leap in consciousness, when our consciousness evolves and expands to include the whole community of life, and when we humans finally learn how to live appropriately and sustainably **within** that planetary community of life. How will this happen? By cultivating the psychic/spiritual dispositions we will need to live joyously and graciously within the limitations and constraints that the larger community of life to which we belong – the planetary community – imposes on us.

*The choice is ours: form a global partnership to care for Earth and one another or risk the destruction of ourselves and the diversity of life. Fundamental changes are needed in our values, institutions, and ways of living. We must realize that when basic needs have been met, human development is primarily about **being** more, not **having** more. We have the knowledge and technology to provide for all and to reduce our impacts on the environment. The emergence of a global civil society is creating new opportunities to build a democratic and humane world. Our environmental, political, social, and spiritual challenges are interconnected, and together we can forge inclusive solutions. (Preamble - The Earth Charter)*

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3 King, Ursula, *Christ in All Things: Exploring Spirituality with Teilhard de Chardin*, pp.42-45
When you enter Redwood Cottage, a calm energy washes over you. It is peaceful and set apart from the busyness of daily life. The ceiling is made from the redwood trees that once grew only a few yards away. The floor and walls are earthen—made from the clay of the land it sits on.

This tranquil place is one of the spaces for rest and renewal created by Sister Pat McCrann as a part of her spiritual life ministry, Namasté. The 584-square-foot Redwood Cottage is a special part of this ministry—a place where SNJM spirituality and the Sisters’ commitment to environmental sustainability meet. “The sacred space we are creating is very simple and it honors nature,” says Sister Pat.

Sister Pat founded Namasté in 1985 to provide opportunities for rest, renewal and spiritual exploration for all people. For a time, Namasté was based at St. Rita Parish House in Portland, Oregon. Later it moved to the upper level of Bethel Lutheran Church’s fellowship hall. Today, Namasté has three retreat spaces. The House of Solitude is in Yacolt, Washington. Sequoia Retreat Room and Redwood Cottage are on the 3.5 acres in Oregon City, where Sister Pat and Sister Mary Breiling live. Sequoia
Retreat Room is a part of the main house on the property. Redwood Cottage is a free-standing retreat house designed for one person.

When Sisters Pat and Mary first moved onto the land in Oregon City, Redwood Cottage was only a dream. Sister Pat hoped that one day a small hermitage could be on the land that would allow an individual to experience real restful solitude just 30 minutes from the center of Portland. After a few years and many prayers, this vision was able to come true with the generous gift of a longtime friend of Namasté—Vaunie Maier.

Vaunie’s spiritual life was transformed by working with Sister Pat and Namasté. Vaunie passed away in 2009 and left a significant gift to Namasté in her will. When her husband, Gene, asked Sister Pat if she had any upcoming projects the funds could be used for, she told him about her dream to have a cottage—“a simple space where someone could stay overnight for rest and renewal, whatever that would mean for them.” Gene knew his wife would want Sister Pat’s dream to come true. He helped plan the project and chose the name Redwood Cottage.

Sister Mary was also instrumental in planning and building the retreat space. She connected with architect Carolyn Forsyth of the firm Ankrom Moisan, who has a passion for sustainable design. Their partnership brought to life the vision for a tranquil, hermitage-style building with a small ecological footprint.

Ankrom Moisan donated hours to the project so that Carolyn could be compensated for her work without asking the Sisters to go over the small project budget. In consultation with Carolyn, the cottage was built with the Living Building Challenge as a guideline.

The Living Building Challenge is an international sustainable building certification program more rigorous than well-known programs like LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certification. It looks at 20 requirements in seven categories—site, water, energy, health, materials, equity and beauty. Buildings can be certified as “living” if they meet all 20 requirements after an audit that takes place after the building has been in use for at least 12 months. For many reasons, the Sisters did not seek official certification for the retreat house, but used the Living Building Challenge as an aspirational goal for the project.

Ceiling and decks of the cottage came from 83 redwood trees planted on the property in 1978, which eventually grew too close together and needed to be thinned. The harvested wood was milled into boards on site, reducing the carbon footprint of the project right from the beginning. These trees became the ceiling and the deck of Redwood Cottage.
The cottage is insulated with straw bales from a nearby farm. Earthen floors were made from straw and clay, combined and then sealed with oil. The clay used in Redwood Cottage was sifted by Sister Mary and Sister Carolyn Coleman. Sister Joan Flynn helped install the straw bale insulation and earthen plaster walls. The water supply comes from a filtered cistern of collected rainwater; hot water is heated by two solar panels on the roof. The trim, cabinets and fixtures were reclaimed from the Oregon Provincial House - the Sisters’ former convent - when Mary’s Woods Continuing Care Community was built. Redwood Cottage embodies not only the spirit of the Sisters’ charism, but also their hard work and pieces of SNJM history. Sister Pat says, “Our history is living inside this cottage.” The inviting energy of the space comes from all of these elements.

As the architect, Carolyn says she appreciated the opportunity to participate in fulfilling the sustainable vision for Redwood Cottage. She pointed out that creating a building using sustainable methods helped to honor the person in whose memory it was built. “You don’t want to build something in memory of somebody and have it be a tax on the Earth,” she said. “In order to do justice to that memory, you want to build a building that is living.”

The architect says she enjoyed being a part of the retreat house project. She continues to work in the field of sustainable building and views sustainability, as the Sisters do, within a larger context. Sustainability is not just about eco-friendly building projects, she explains, but also about how we live our lives materially and spiritually. “Sustainability is not a standalone thing. It is at its very core integrated with and a part of spirituality. It is a part of our society and our relationships with each other.”

The Sisters of the Holy Names believe in supporting the full development of every person. That mission calls for space and time for reflection, which Sister Pat sees many people struggling to find. She lives out the SNJM mission by providing spaces for people to renew themselves and journey toward their full development. These spaces give people the “gift of quiet” and “frees people up to listen to their inner selves,” she says.
Jessica Ingman knows the gifts provided by the Redwood Cottage firsthand. She has come for retreats there twice and plans to return again soon. Jessica is the Pastoral Assistant at St. Ignatius Catholic Church in Portland, which has long been connected with the Sisters of the Holy Names. When Jessica was looking for a retreat location a few years ago, Sister Lucinda Peightal suggested she look into Namasté.

Jessica says she was attracted to the Redwood Cottage because it was comfortable, welcoming and connected to nature. It was not far from the city but felt like a world away. She also sought out Sister Pat for spiritual direction, which she provides for those interested. During Jessica’s retreat time, she would wake up with the sun, pray, journal, reflect on scripture passages and check in with Sister Pat once a day. Being at Redwood Cottage allowed Jessica to sink into the time and space she needed for prayer.

Jessica was also pleased with the sustainable design of the cottage. “We are not only called to right relationship to God and our neighbor but also the Earth,” she says. As she spent time in this special place set apart and fully surrounded by the outdoors, she experienced the Sisters’ “warmth and care for the land.” It provided the right setting for her to feel God’s presence, because “it is through experiencing the natural world that I connect with God.”

Many others have told Sister Pat their experience at Redwood Cottage changed them, both during their stay and after they left. One woman committed herself to using less water at home after her retreat. Others described a change in their spirit.

“People are saying when they walk in, they feel something different. Others have said when they come in they feel embraced,” says Sister Pat. “I think this is how Mother Earth wants to be with us. [Redwood Cottage] creates a very safe place and everything is natural. You don’t have to get dressed up to be there. All the windows enable you to be one with Mother Earth. All she wants to do is nourish you and encourage you.”

She says building Redwood Cottage demonstrated that building sustainably is possible and that the Sisters of the Holy Names take seriously the call to environmental responsibility.

“We are giving visibility to the hopes and dreams of others who also feel a call to live into this reality. We have become a resource for others who are interested in building something with these values.”

Photos © Ankrom Moisan Architects, photos by Kirsten Force
Brokenness may heal, if we listen to one another

By Linda Riggers, SNJM

This past July, 325 Holy Names Sisters, Associates and Lay Consecrated met in Portland for a Province gathering where the theme was “Abundant Life for All.” Besides other business and some wonderful reconnecting times of prayer and socializing, we discussed matters related to sustainability – how we could contribute to the growing awareness that human actions have an impact on our planet’s ability to sustain life. We spoke of our “reluctances” about living more in solidarity with the Earth – hesitations related to the convenience of using cars, the daunting task of sufficiently understanding heating alternatives, the tediousness of composting, recycling, reusing, and negotiating shared devices and rides, the learning curve for using Uber or e-readers, the discipline of acquiring only what we need, not what is advertised. Sound familiar?

One thing we talked about is how awareness and motivation generally precede action. In his blog, David Suzuki, Canadian science broadcaster and environmentalist, speaks about how climate changes might finally be creating a consciousness shift. Talking about polar bears and extreme weather, he writes:

I’ll go out on a limb and suggest a shift is now taking place…When enough people demand action, take to the streets, write to business, political and religious leaders and talk to friends and family, change starts happening. We never know how big it will be until it’s occurred … (http://www.davidsuzuki.org/blogs)

I hope to try one suggested practice to become more conscious of a collaborative (vs. dominion) relationship with nature. As I commute, I plan to mentally address the trees, bushes and flowers I see, saying things like, “Trees, thank you for absorbing my CO2 and giving me oxygen,” and to the birds, “Your song – and your mosquito consumption – I appreciate so much.” I plan to address the rain, sun, air. (Sound a bit like St. Francis’ “Brother Earth, Sister Sky” talk? Maybe I’m just starting to “get it!”)

As a religious community, the Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary have committed to assessing our investments with “Abundant Life for All” as a frame of reference for making shareholder resolutions,
and we have committed to studying “Laudato Si.”

At our summer meeting, we were privileged to have Sister Simone Campbell address us. She tied together – as Pope Francis does – the issues related to environmental crises and those related to poverty and war.

One thing especially caught my attention, something also found in the Pope's words. Referring to an expression from Pedro Arrupe, SJ, Sister Simone encouraged us to think about what breaks our hearts, and to listen for that in speaking with others, especially those who have a different perspective than we do. This is the entry point for action.

With relation to the environment, I remembered when I was in college in the 1960s, becoming impassioned by a teacher sharing studies showing, at that time, that all the fish were dying in Lake Michigan. I recalled seeing this lake - where you couldn't see the other side. I was aghast that it could become so polluted that fish could not survive. (Concerted efforts reversed this trend – another good lesson.) I can trace the start of my ongoing interest in care for the Earth to that one summer class.

At our SNJM meeting in July, I realized I need to listen more for what breaks the hearts of those with whom I wish to collaborate for environmental improvement. Perhaps it will be fished-out rivers, skyrocketing prices for almonds due to the California drought, or a friend’s child with environmentallly-caused asthma. Might it be knowing someone in Washington state affected by the landslide in Oso, or having a friend’s home be threatened by wildfires in Chelan? Perhaps a single photo – a polar bear on an ice floe, an oil-covered egret, a scorched hillside or barren mountain peak where snow usually is. Have “holy curiosity,” Sister Simone said; ask more, what are the causes, are there any solutions.

Equally important is a belief that, with grace, a broken heart might be mended through the concerted efforts of humankind. Nature is forgiving; nature possesses immense powers to heal – if we let it! When I was in Hué, Vietnam three years ago, my companions (who had gone yearly for 10 years) commented that it was the first summer they had heard songbirds. Bird populations had been destroyed through chemicals during the war. But they were recovering.

What image or event in nature “breaks your heart?” Why? Listen for that in others. Find common ground; ask what we might do together to mend a broken heart.

This article was originally written for Sister Linda’s local parish bulletin’s peace and justice column.
Reflection Guide for Laudato Si’

The SNJM Water Committee, a sub-committee of the SNJM Justice and Peace Network, has prepared a reflection guide for Laudato Si’. Prior to following the reflection guide you can review the Encyclical on the Vatican’s website. You can also watch a six-minute video prepared by the Vatican which includes images, music, quotations from the Encyclical at https://youtu.be/1tYdOiqwpg.

From the Holy Father’s letter of 6 August 2015 to Cardinals Koch and Turkson:

As Christians we wish to contribute to resolving the ecological crisis which humanity is presently experiencing. In doing so, we must first rediscover in our own rich spiritual patrimony the deepest motivations for our concern for the care of creation. We need always to keep in mind that, for believers in Jesus Christ, the Word of God who became man for our sake, “the life of the spirit is not dissociated from the body or from nature or from worldly realities, but lived in and with them, in communion with all that surrounds us” (Laudato Si’, 216). The ecological crisis thus summons us to a profound spiritual conversion: Christians are called to “an ecological conversion whereby the effects of their encounter with Jesus Christ become evident in their relationship with the world around them” (ibid., 217). For “living our vocation to be protectors of God’s handiwork is essential to a life of virtue; it is not an optional or a secondary aspect of our Christian experience” (ibid.).

Reading (choose one or select your own - to be read slowly)

Laudato Si’ §§ 8-9, the two paragraphs of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew’s teaching

Laudato Si’, §§ 241-242, Mary and Joseph

Genesis 1:26 – 2:3 and Genesis 2:15

Reflection & Sharing

1. The spirituality of St. Francis has touched Pope Francis deeply. He shows us just how inseparable is the bond between concern for nature, justice for the poor, commitment to society, and interior peace. How do you see this?

2. What are the consequences of seeing the earth as a gift that we have freely received and must share with others and that also belongs to those who will follow us (#159)?

3. Throughout the encyclical, Francis links concern for the poor with the environment. Why does he do that? What is your thought?

Intercessions/Prayers of the Faithful (Book of Blessings #1018)

As we pray in gratitude for God’s blessing upon all of creation and the work of our hands, let us not forget that we must do the works of holiness in our lives.
Let us, then, pray to God, saying: Lord, hear our prayer.

All provident God, your care has given us food from the earth; grant that the crops we harvest may sustain us in body and help us to grow in spirit, we pray to the Lord …

You feed the birds of the air and clothe the lilies of the field; teach us to seek first your kingship over us and teach us your way of holiness, we pray to the Lord …

Through Jesus Christ you have made the world abound in works of holiness; grant that, living in him, we may share in his fullness and life and bear much fruit, we pray to the Lord …

In the Eucharist you have taken up the fruits of our hands as a sign of the mystery of faith; grant that the gifts we bring to be consecrated at your son’s table may work for the continuing good of the Church’s life, we pray to the Lord …

You planned that all your children should share in the goods of your creation, grant that all those who are in need may come to enjoy an untroubled life and to glorify you and praise your holy name, we pray to the Lord …

Pope Francis writes: “At the conclusion of this lengthy reflection which has been both joyful and troubling, I propose that we offer two prayers. The first we can share with all who believe in a God who is the all-powerful Creator, while in the other we Christians ask for inspiration to take up the commitment to creation set before us by the Gospel of Jesus.”

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A Prayer for Our Earth

All-powerful God, you are present in the whole universe and in the smallest of your creatures.

You embrace with your tenderness all that exists.

Pour out upon us the power of your love, that we may protect life and beauty.

Fill us with peace, that we may live as brothers and sisters, harming no one.

O God of the poor, help us to rescue the abandoned and forgotten of this earth, so precious in your eyes.

Bring healing to our lives, that we may protect the world and not prey on it, that we may sow beauty, not pollution and destruction.

Touch the hearts of those who look only for gain at the expense of the poor and the earth.

Teach us to discover the worth of each thing, to be filled with awe and contemplation, to recognize that we are profoundly united with every creature as we journey towards your infinite light.

We thank you for being with us each day.

Encourage us, we pray, in our struggle for justice, love and peace.

Amen.

(An adaptation of the prayer prepared for Sept 1, 2015 - World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation)