

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

January 7, 2011 at 9:39am

Shaping a spirituality of sustainability

by NCR Editorial Staff

In Catholic schools when we were young, the sisters connected the dots for us, teaching us where we were in the world and what was important. These teachers bricked in the foundations for a spirituality, the ground floor of an ongoing encounter with a tradition of wisdom, complete with techniques for prayer and strategies for inner work and conversion.

The sisters provided a container -- not a perfect one, but workable -- into which we could pour our strivings to make sense of life and the world around us. Catholic education offered pious devotions and greenhoused a seedling sense of the world's sacredness into flourishing growth.

As we enter the second decade of a new century, we can see clear signs of real change in the terrain of Catholic spirituality and culture. There are a variety of individuals and religious communities that are engaged in ecological education, in Earth-friendly enterprises and projects.

For more information on the following profiles, see *NCR's* new **Eco Catholic blog**. It's updated daily with news, reflections, and suggestions for ecological living.

For example, Clare's Well in Annandale, Minn., is an effort by Franciscan sisters to demonstrate love and compassion for Earth and all she sustains. They say in their literature, "Let the life-giving energy of Mother Earth restore your balance. ... The scriptures remind us of what happens at a well."

At Green Mountain Monastery in rural Vermont, founded by Passionist Sr. Gail Worcelo and Sr. Bernadette Bostwick, the ancient monastic values of prayer and silence, simplicity and scholarship combine with manual labor, organic farming and the cultivation of the arts at the service of the entire Earth community.

Marya Grathwohl, a Sister of St. Francis and founder of Earth Hope, describes her popular Earth Hope Cosmology class, held every week in the Sonoma County, Calif., jail. "Encircled by the first group of inmates, I catch the merest flicker of a response when they hear the word hope. I ask them to think about things that started out very small and eventually became huge. Like the universe.

"I quote my friend, Drew Dellinger: "In the beginning, the universe was tinier than a tear, more minuscule than a molecule." "Does hope ever feel that small in your life?" I ask. Muscular young men laden with tattoos nod slowly. Some grimace. I engage them in telling the miraculous story of the expanding universe. "So, split seconds after that small beginning, then what happened?" They know more than I'd expected. They have questions, "How does this fit with the Bible? Can you help me share this story with my daughter? She could use some hope." As I turn to go, they stand, and clap and clap and clap."

The spiritual landscape is becoming permeable and porous once again. God's Spirit blows fresh breezes across the barren deserts of sacred traditions and time-honored institutions. Where Catholicism and ecology meet, a new culture is being invented. New possibilities for spiritual pilgrimage open up. This emerging spirituality of hope, relationship and connection with the Earth is truly one that will enlarge and open new vistas.

Scientist Douglas Vakoch, in an interview on Page 21, reminds us: When we pull back and look at our place in the universe, it's obvious we humans are in our adolescence, that we are struggling. We have the means to destroy the life-support systems of the planet and thus we may not make it into adulthood.

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"On the ground? Catholic ecology is shaping a spirituality of sustainability and hope that will be essential in getting us through this adolescence.

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