A new phase for religious life?

by Maureen Fiedler

NCR Today

I just returned from a wonderful five-day meeting of the Loretto Community in St. Louis. It focused on ministries and was entitled "Working with a Jubilee Heart." (We're getting ready to celebrate our 200th anniversary as a community in 2012.) We've come a long way since those early days on the Kentucky frontier, but we're still boarding new wagon trains and looking over new horizons into the future.

One of those horizons is our exploration of a new "cosmological phase" of religious life.

Our Loretto Earth Network sponsored two speakers, Gail Worcelo and Bernadette Bostwick, who got us thinking in new directions. They come from Green Mountain Monastery in Vermont, a new foundation which they co-created with the now deceased Passionist priest, Thomas Berry. Thomas Berry was the outstanding ecological theologian, or "geologian" of the last 50 years, and he is buried at Green Mountain Monastery.

In one of her talks, Gail laid out 6 historical phases of religious life over two millennia:

1. the age of the desert mothers and fathers;
2. the "community" phase ushered in by Benedict and Scholastica;
3. the "mendicant" stage of Francis and Clare;
4. the "intellectual" phase led by the Jesuits;
5. the "activist" stage brought in by women like Mary Ward who broke out of a cloistered lifestyle to minister to those in need; and now
6. the cosmological phase with its awareness of living in special oneness with the earth and the cosmos.
What I found most interesting, however, was stage 5, the "activist" stage. When these women were told that "nuns" could not engage in active ministries, and had to remain cloistered, they said: OK, we'll call ourselves something other than "nuns" then! They became "extra-canonical."

As religious communities today wrestle with Vatican relationships, and the necessary freedom to enter the cosmological age, it's a lesson to keep in mind! We can name our own reality, and chart our own future. We can answer the calls we hear today all around us.

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