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Sister's Lenten resource brings the Earth and Jesus together

by Sharon Abercrombie

Eco Catholic

When a group of religious educators approached Sr. Terri MacKenzie to ask, "What is a good way to teach little children about God?", MacKenzie, a longtime classroom teacher, had a ready reply: "Don't look up at the sky while you are talking to them. They will think that God is only 'up there' and far, far away, instead of here on earth with us, in us and in everything that exists."

To mark the beginning of Lent, MacKenzie, a member of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus, will bring her sky-to-earth grounding message to another venue with a group of adults at her parish, St. Gertrude Catholic Church in Chicago.

Through meditation, she will have them looking toward the sky, the source of the creation of the universe more than 13 billion years ago. But she will then turn them around toward their earthly home, to the everyday immediacy of dirt in their lives. Plain old dirt. Soil, the brown skin of the earth, which feeds every living critter and us our daily lunches. Soil, the brown womb that gives birth to redwoods, spring grass, tangerines, violets, dandelions, and birds of paradise blooms.

"Spirituality of Soil: A Lenten Journey from Cosmic Dust to Easter Garden" is part of the 78-year-old sister's new online project with EcospiritualityResources.com. Launched in June, her free downloadable resource features both Lenten and Advent reflections and an informational video on hydraulic fracking, "Time for an Energy Change," that she wrote. There are YouTube videos, books, and contemporary eco-music resources by Kathy Sherman and Jan Novotka. The rich assortment is there for Catholics and Christians to better understand the evolving worldview coming from the new science and new theology "so that they can better integrate their beliefs into that worldview," she explains on her website.

Each session connects the Sunday Lenten scripture readings with the wisdom of contemporary writers Mary Coelho, Judy Cannato, Mary Oliver, Thomas Berry, Fr. Al Fritsch and other environmental spirituality pioneers. Excerpts from the writings of crusty journalist Studs Terkel even make an appearance.

MacKenzie's sessions highlight the roles of earth and trees in the week's scripture readings and how they connect with what God asks of us. Each will include a closing activity and suggestions for Earth Care action. At the conclusion of the opening Ash Wednesday gathering, participants will anoint and bless one another with soil.

Does MacKenzie know of other Lenten groups who will be using her materials? So far, she has received no direct feedback from individuals. However, as of last week, there have been more than 5,500 hits to her website. "They've come from all over the world," she said, adding that she is amazed, overwhelmed and humbled.

Ecospirituality Resources is a refinement of materials MacKenzie created for her own religious community in 2003 after they invited her to develop a Lenten water reflection. This led to more Lenten materials and then, over the next nine years, expanded to include Advent materials. Her collection covers the entire three-year cycle of scripture readings. Each year will showcase that selection of readings and ecology-related reflections.

MacKenzie said her kinship with Earth was late in coming.

"I'm a poster child of someone who had no early experiences of caring for Earth or finding the divine there," she said. Even though she grew up in Chicago, close to Lake Michigan, "it was just background to me."

When MacKenzie entered the Society of the Holy Child Jesus 60 years ago, the implications of her community's charism "with all life, not just humans, being part of evolution, or a passion to care for every sacred part of Earth never translated for me." When she was tapped to develop workshops for her province around the 1971 World Synod of Bishops document *Justice in the World*, she began connecting many of the far-reaching dots justice encompasses.

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But there was still one dot to go. A blue-green one, a water-filled planet pulsing with life within the Milky Way galaxy, located in an expanding universe. She found it in 1979 when she heard Sr. Miriam MacGillis, founder of Genesis Farm, talk about the consciousness of the universe.

"I was knocked off my horse," MacKenzie said. "I knew I had a lot to learn, and I felt called to learn it." Justice, she realized, included the earth as well.

During the '80s and '90s, she visited Universe Story writers and educators Thomas Berry and Mary Evelyn Tucker at Riverdale Center in New York. She studied at Notre Dame University summer school, where she met St. Joseph sister and artist Mary Southard, a fellow Chicagoan. It was a good connection. In the late 1990s, when Southard wanted to take a sabbatical from creating her yearly Ministry of the Arts earth calendar, MacKenzie stepped into her artistic shoes for two years.

MacKenzie is active in Sisters of Earth, a group of sisters and laywomen who are active in many types of

earth ministries. She is one with them in their eco-related resolve: "I see (earth care) as a call within our call. And we are not going to burn out."

MacKenzie is also the organizer of a retreat on The Universe Story, which will be held June 14-17 near Philadelphia. Sponsored by the Sisters of the Holy Child EcoSpirituality group, it will feature Mary Evelyn Tucker, Jean Newbold, Terry Moral, Mary Ann Buckley and Lucy Slinger. Click here for more information.

Editor's postscript: As deadline approached, we discovered a kindred Lenten calendar from the Cincinnati archdiocese that partners well with Terri MacKenzie's website. The calendar, "Franciscan Energy Fast -- Because We Love God," offers daily suggestions for cutting back and slowing down.

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