

Spirituality: Source of Spirit and Life

“Shepherding God’s Creation”: “A New Thing” A Word from the Congregational Spirituality Centre

At every Congregational Chapter, we commit ourselves as Sisters of the Good Shepherd to do a new thing in the spirit of the gospel that is our foundational rule of life. At our last Chapter, we committed ourselves to “foster a deepening of our spirituality and a new consciousness of our identity as Good Shepherd, which enlivens our prayer, community life, ministries and our desire to ‘shepherd’ God’s creation.”¹ In other words, we broadened the pegs of our tent to embrace the whole of creation and not simply the human community. As our GSIJP Position Paper on Ecology reminds us: “We are called to change ... from the preeminence of humanity to the reverence for all life.”² What we are choosing to do is indeed “a new thing”. It is informed by our awareness that the Earth itself is crying out for justice.

Former General Councilor, Barbara Davis, RGS, offered a reflection on doing a “new thing”: “The context for imagining new things is in the memory of who we are and how to be who we are which grows out of a foundational event constantly reinterpreted.”³ Her words are primarily directed to our congregational founding story. They could just as well apply to our bigger story as members of the Earth community, “the entire ecosystem or web of life”.⁴

We have become increasingly aware, as human beings, that our foundational story takes us back much further than SJE in the 17th century, or SME in the early 19th century could ever have imagined, even if, in their respective times, there was a growing consciousness of Earth’s antiquity.

At the same time, as scientists were reading the signs in fossils and other Earth evidences, biblical scholarship was moving away from calculating the age of Earth on the basis of literal readings of Genesis. While Charles Darwin’s work on the origin of the species was published some years before SME’s death, the impact of the work on evolution was not to be felt in general until very much later.

We now know that the originating or foundational event that binds us to one another and to the whole of creation goes back to some 13.7 billion years; that the Earth came into being 3.7 billion years ago; and that modern humans appeared on Earth some 180,000 years ago. We know too that everything in the universe has its origins in what scientists call the “Big

¹ 29th Congregational Chapter, Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd, Angers, France. June 13-July 9, 2009

² GSIJP, “Position Papers on Mission and Ministry”, p.14.

³ M. Woodward & R. Crumlin, eds. *We are Caught Into this Mystery: Excerpts from the Writings and Reflections of Barbara Davis, RGS* (Craftsman Press, 2002), p.9.

⁴ See Laurie Braaten: “Earth Community in Joel: A Call to Identity with the Rest of Creation,” in *Exploring Ecological Hermeneutics*, edited by Norman C. Habel & Peter Trudinger (Atlanta, Society of Biblical Literature, 2008), p.63.

Bang". It is difficult to imagine what all of this means. At the very least, it invites us to recognize our interconnectedness with all of creation.

For most of us, a new understanding of the universe and of our place in the universe story can be dated to 20th July 1969, when the first human stepped on to the surface of the moon. Australian theologian, Fr. Denis Edwards, reflects on the impact of this moment in history and draws attention to astronaut William Anders' beautiful photograph of Earth rising above the Moon. Edwards points out that we are the first generation to be able to image our planet as a whole:

*"This view of Earth constitutes a new moment in our cultural history. It brings with it a new appreciation of Earth's hospitality to life. It offers us an imaginative picture of one global community of life, of one human family, which is deeply interconnected not only with the other species of our planet, but also with all its life systems."*⁵

At this point, you may wish to reflect on what it must have meant, to the astronauts of the Apollo 8 mission, to see Earth from space for the first time. The image called "Earthrise" may provide a catalyst for your reflection.

A new thing is happening in our world, a new thing that now calls us to shepherd God's wonderful creation and to protect it from forces that would render it less hospitable than it was in the past. In our times, we are beginning to recognize our kinship with the whole Earth community, the human and other-than-human. We need to deepen this new consciousness, so that we might truly come to understand the intrinsic worth of the entire Earth community and treat it with the reverence and care it deserves.⁶

Shepherding God's creation is our way of living the gospel. We have always shepherded the human members of the Earth community. The invitation now is to expand that shepherding in order to include the other-than-human or more-than-human (which includes the human). Let us enter wholeheartedly into this new moment of grace, this "ecological conversion" to which we are called, personally and in community, and/or in our diverse ministry contexts.⁷

Towards Ecological Conversion

- How do you imagine the planet as a whole?
- How are you hearing the call to expand our shepherding to the entire Earth Community?
- Share with others on one or two ways of reverencing and caring for the Earth Community.

⁵ Denis Edwards, *Jesus and the Natural World: Exploring a Christian Approach to Ecology* (Mulgrave: Garrett Publishing, 2012), p.3.

⁶ Note that the Hebrew verbs in the command "to till and to keep" in Genesis 2:15 mean "to reverence and conserve".

⁷ For the expression "ecological conversion", see Pope John Paul II, General Audience Address, 17th January 2001, pars. 3-4.