



[Last index](#)

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## Spirituality

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### Rosaries focus on sacred creation

By SHARON ABERCROMBIE

**P**rayer beads, an ancient method for keeping track of one's religious recitations and meditations, are evolving to keep pace with the expanding of spiritual consciousness about our planet.

Internationally, the shift manifested itself in October when Pope John Paul II announced the beginning of a "Year of the Rosary" by adding five new mysteries dedicated to events from Jesus' public life. Called the Mysteries of Light, the new rosary theme focuses on Christ's baptism, first miracle, his preaching ministry, transfiguration and his institution of the Eucharist.

Individuals who are drawn to the ecological spirituality movement now have their own special prayer beads as well. These rosaries are shaped around a growing awareness of the inherent sacredness of the Earth, of the Universe itself -- beginning with the original "Mystery of Light" -- the transfiguration of what had been nothingness into the "Big Bang," that first spark of vast radiance that set the universe into motion.

Passionist Srs. Gail Worcelo and Bernadette Bostwick have named their rosary "Earth Prayer Beads." Paula Hendrick has named hers, "The Cosmic Rosary." Connie Barlow and Michael Dowd have dubbed theirs "Great Story Beads."

Amazingly enough, neither the nuns nor Paula Hendrick knew of the other's rosary. Each rosary evolved independently -- a phenomenon Connie Barlow sees as an example of parallel evolution -- the same thing happening independently in several places, at about the same time. "It's the Earth calling forth these ways of being," reflected Barlow, a science writer and author of *The Ghosts of Evolution*. This calling forth has been an interfaith one. Only Worcelo and Bostwick are Catholic.

The cofounders of the Green Mountain Ecozoic Monastery near Weston, Vt., in 1999, they were the first to hear the call. They had felt drawn to create a special prayer form that individuals could use to focus on the healing of Earth. So, tapping into their Catholic heritage, they designed a set of wrist-sized Earth Prayer Beads modeled on the ancient Christian beggar beads. The Anglo-Saxon term for bead, *bede*, means "to beg." St. Augustine, once said, "We are all beggars before God," explained Worcelo.

The sisters' Earth Prayer Beads are 15 handcrafted blue and green orbs, each bead representing a billion years in the unfolding story of the universe, "of which we are a part," Worcelo said. The central bead of the little rosary is a square, which draws upon the ancient and the contemporary at the same time. The bead carries an image of a fish, "the ancient symbol for Christ and a reminder in our time of the depletion of the fisheries of the planet," said Worcelo.

## **Ecozoic Monastery**

A group of volunteers from Weston make the beads to support the sisters' Ecozoic Monastery, which is used for earth-based workshops and retreats. The crafters use hemp for their handmade bead bags, and the set sells for \$15. "Our intention is to bring the power of prayer to bear upon the needs of our planet. The journey around the beads is a way to awaken to the presence of the Divine within the total sacred community of life," she said.

Earth Bead creators pray and fast as they make the rosaries. "We do this with the intention that Earth may know healing and that as human we might manifest expressions of harmony and integration in this world, for the sake of all life and thus become conscious participants in the evolutionary process."

At the sisters' kitchen table, volunteers hand roll the beads from four colors of a low-temperature baking clay. The beads are fired in their oven.

So far, "we've rolled over 32,000 beads," said Worcelo. More than 2,000 sets of the beads have made their way all over the world, throughout the United States. Ireland, England, India, Africa, New Zealand and the Philippines, "and to places we don't even know about," said Worcelo.

In July 2001, as the Vermont rosary makers made their beads, more than halfway across the United States in Seattle, Paula Hendrick was conducting one of her women's Earth Story circles. She had just finished leading the "Spiral Walk," a moving meditation created by Genesis Farm founder Caldwell Dominican Sr. Miriam MacGillis. Participants doing the walking meditation move to different stations, symbolizing the evolutionary path of creation.

When Hendrick asked for feedback, one woman wondered if the meditation could be done privately, in the confines of a small space. Well, why not put the walk into a rosary format, suggested two Catholics. The women explained that the Catholic rosary is a meditation based upon significant events in the lives of Jesus and Mary, through the Joyful, Sorrowful and Glorious Mysteries. Why not make a set of beads to keep track of significant events in the evolution of the universe, from the Big Bang through star and planet formation, the beginnings of biological life and onward?

Their idea sounded good to Hendrick. She knew about prayer beads, having spent time with Seattle's large Sufi community. So the three women went shopping for beads. They scoured local stores and garage sales, finding one treasure after another. They found a large, colorful bead that could pass for the supernova explosions that created the carbon element out of which life formed. They fell in love with a bunch of little trinkets shaped like stars, birds, turtles, flowers, dinosaurs and crescent moons. Returning with their bounty, they went to work.

Supplied with wire cutters, wire, pliers, thread, beads and imagination, each woman made a rosary, telling the universe story in her own way. "We loved it," said Hendrick.

Each of them realized that the act of creating a set of prayer beads was as meaningful as the follow-up meditation. Hendrick especially was taken with the process. She began collecting more beads. Her mom opened up her jewelry box to further the cause.

When Paula Hendrick began giving away her cosmic rosaries to friends, the recipients asked her to teach them how to make their own.

Since then, Hendrick has conducted numerous classes.

For her own spiritual practice, she uses the cosmic rosary as “an aid for centering and reflecting.” Sometimes she wears it as a necklace. It serves as a great conversation starter, reported Hendrick. When people ask about it, she invites them to sign up for her Earth Story circles, where she has since incorporated a rosary-making session into the curriculum. She recently put up a Web site to help people create their own rosaries. It even has timelines spelling out significant evolutionary steps such as the creation of dinosaurs, oxygen, flowers, birds and humans.

“For some people, the universe story is brand new, so they follow a very simple timeline. For others, it’s an opportunity to get ‘hands on’ with something they’ve studied. The bottom line is everyone learns that our scientific story of the universe is a sacred story,” said Hendrick.

From Seattle, the Cosmic Rosary wound its way back to the East Coast. Hendrick sent one to her friend, Connie Barlow. But all the glass beads got smashed en route, so Barlow went shopping for replacements. “And then, one thing led to another,” she confessed.

Barlow, a board member of the American Teihard Association and founding member of the Epic of Evolution Society, invited her minister husband, Michael Dowd, to accompany her. Neither had ever had the opportunity to pray the Catholic rosary, or any other variety, for that matter.

## **Caught up in creation’s magic**

Barlow calls herself a “religious naturalist,” and Dowd is an ordained member of the Unitarian Universalist denomination. In

1991 he wrote *Earthspirit: A Handbook for Nurturing Ecological Christianity*, one of the first major works to popularize the epic of evolution for Christians. It looks at the core tenets of Christianity from the perspective of the new cosmology.

By the time the pair had finished stringing their own rosaries, they became caught up in the magic of the creative process. Dowd saw how sacramental it could be as well. "This is a way to not only celebrate Jesus' story, but everybody else's sacred story, as well," he exclaimed.

"Caught up" might be too mild a description for Dowd's enthusiasm. He has since made a Great Story Rosary with 270 beads. Like some Franciscans or Dominicans, he wears it at his waist when he conducts church services.

The Great Story beads go with this couple during their travels. Since last April they have been traveling around the country in their van to teach the Great Story to anyone who will listen. The couple is using their savings for this new ministry. They depend upon the generosity of their hosts and audiences to provide food and shelter. They are speaking to adults and children in churches, schools, convents, colleges and at private gatherings. The beads are always there during their presentations. "Our point is that the Universe Story is not 'out there.' It's our story, too," said Dowd, who added that he and his wife hoped to bring it to mainstream America.

Like Paula Hendrick, Barlow wears her rosary as a necklace. "Pick a bead, any bead and I'll tell you its story," she said.

There are no rigid rules for making one's own Cosmic, Earth or Great Story Beads. As Hendrick, Barlow and Dowd point out, the expanding universe is the limit. Beginners on the journey can use Jennifer Morgan's new book for children, *Born With a Bang*, for ideas. Barlow and Dowd suggest adding beads symbolizing the birth of significant religious figures, personal histories, and even one's own birthday.

The birthday piece made Sonya Shoptaugh perk up when she attended one of Dowd and Barlow's workshops. Shoptaugh knew about prayer beads because she is a practicing Buddhist. Each April, the Washington D.C. resident celebrates her birthday by returning to

Mendocino County, Calif. -- “my spiritual home, the place where the land meets the water, the place where I feel most at peace.”

Shoptaugh learned about the great story rosary “just as [Dowd] was making his,” she recalled. Shoptaugh decided she needed to make one, too. Dowd sent her to the same bead shop he had gone to. “They gave me a discount,” said the teacher/writer/photographer.

Last April, Shoptaugh arrived in Mendocino County with a supply of beads. “I strung my beads starting with the Divine, and the beginning of the universe as we know it, continuing through time where my life becomes a part of the strand. ... I felt in an emotional and physical way my place in the stream of things. I honored the birth of plants, when water first came into existence, the coming of frogs and trees. I felt at a core level how my birth is part of a long lineage of births and deaths and births.”

When she finished making her rosary, she dunked the beads in the ocean as “a symbolic blessing and christening, sanctifying the strand in the waters of my spiritual home. I put them on proudly, feeling both the solidarity of connection to Earth as well as the fragility of my singular existence. I am humbled and honored to have a place in the evolution of life.”

Shoptaugh said that when she holds the beads in her hands, she prays for “humanity and myself to awaken to the responsibility bestowed upon us to be wise stewards of the Earth’s resources. My passion for Earth, social action, science and God has combined together in the Universe Story rosary.”

Meanwhile, back in Weston, Vt., the Sisters of the Green Mountain Ecozoic Monastery are embarking upon a new project. They are creating an expanded version of the Earth Rosary, using the Joyful, Sorrowful and Glorious mysteries to trace the evolution of the Universe.

Their Sorrowful Mysteries are especially heart wrenching. They cover global warming, starvation, war, commodification of water, nuclear weapons, globalization, species extinction and torture.

The sisters have also added another decade -- “The Evolving Nature” of the human being. They hope that humans will evolve to

the level of a “cosmic consciousness” that will one day do away with all the evils of the Sorrowful Mysteries.

The sisters continue to pray their Earth Rosary fervently these days: “Given the direction our country is going in regarding war, we all need to pull out our prayer beads and petition the Divine double time,” said Sr. Gail Worcelo.

*Sharon Abercrombie is a free-lance writer who lives in Oakland, Calif.*

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- **Previous:** [Spirituality: Seeking God’s presence at the desert house of prayer](#)
- **Next:** [Spirituality: Prayer beads an ancient devotion](#)
- [Top of page](#)