

# Holy Ground

## Where Catholic Tradition and the Universe Story Meet

by Sr. Gail Worcelo, CP

### Reflections from an Ecozoic Retreat

*Note:* The term "Ecozoic," coined by Thomas Berry, means "house of life" and refers to the emerging life era when we humans will be present to the planet in a mutually enhancing manner. It calls for a relational shift challenging us to know and celebrate our place within the comprehensive context of this numinous universe as well as within our particular regions, continents, and blue-green planet.

#### Day One

It is August 20, 2001 and I am beginning an eight-day silent contemplative prayer retreat at Green Mountain Monastery, the "Ecozoic Monastery" I am cofounding here in the lush green hills of Vermont.

I am sitting on a big rock overlooking the West River, which has been a constant companion over the past year and a half. It is tumbling joyfully in the early morning sun, gurgling its deep and continuous mantra: "All is flow." The river and the silence are settling me down and already I am feeling open and receptive.

I have chosen two, seemingly polar, "texts" that will serve as bedrock and guide for the upcoming days. One text is not at all unusual for a monastic retreat. Engaging in the ancient Christian practice of *Lectio Divina*, or Sacred Reading, I ponder these words from the Old Testament:

Wisdom reaches mightily from one end  
of the heavens to the other and she orders  
all things well. (*Wisdom 8:1*)

Yet, at the same time I sit with an image of M100, a spiral galaxy far removed from our own Milky Way. This image was taken by the Hubble Telescope, whose powerful lenses probe into deep space. The astonishing gifts of the Hubble urge us to revisit some of our oldest questions: Where do we come from? Who are we? Why are we here?

Photons from M100 detected today by sensors on the Hubble began their journey outward in all directions 60 million years ago, traveling at the speed of light. This was a time when Earth was still recovering from its fifth major mass extinction: the terminal Cretaceous event, which eliminated the dinosaurs, the pterosaurs (flying reptiles), and the various reptilian monsters of the sea — ichthyosaurs, plesiosaurs, mosasaurs. Sixty million years ago, mammals had just begun the first of many creative bursts of evolutionary exploration, filling up the ecological niches vacated on land and at sea. When we marvel at the photographs of M100, we are seeing this galaxy as it was sixty million years ago. We are looking back in time.

The universe is one whole, but it presents itself to us in layers of time. Thus the universe as we can know it is not a place; it is an unfolding story. This astonishment I learned while attending classes with Thomas Berry during my novitiate formation at St. Gabriel's Monastery in 1983. I am still not sure that I fully grasp this understanding of the universe as story, or that I ever will. As a species, we are only beginning to experience cosmic depth perception.

It is now late evening. Our monastery has a telescope, and through it I contemplate the night sky in a way unavailable to my ancestors. The words from the book of *Genesis* resound within me:

Look up toward heaven and count the stars,  
if you are able to count them. (*Genesis* 15:5)

At the heart of the word "contemplation" is the Latin word "temple." I cannot see M100 through this telescope, but its image remains in memory. I at least know where to look and acknowledge its invisible presence in the night sky. M100 is a vigil light burning in the temple of the cosmos. Surely M100 deserves a better name! Perhaps something like Luminosity, Radiance, God Bearer.

## **Day Two**

The bell rings at five, signaling the beginning of our monastic day. It is time for Morning Vigil. All is in darkness, except for one candle lighting the prayer space. I take my place on a cushion on the floor and join five other retreatants gathered for the hour of contemplative prayer.

This time of Vigils is the night watch hour, an opportunity to touch the mysterious Presence of God at the heart of the Universe. We discover, as the Gospel of John tells us, that "the Light shines in the darkness." This morning I experience the biblical passage literally. A skylight looms above my head, and in this predawn darkness I can see the shining stars of our Milky Way Galaxy. The words of the psalmist come to mind, "Praise God sun and moon, Praise God shining stars!"

I reflect on the fact that I am made of that same star stuff. The numinous fire that burns in those stars has burned through thirteen billion years of Universe unfolding, and burns in me this morning. It burns in my hunger for the Holy. It burns in every leaf, animal, and stone. It is the Fire within the fire of all things.

This is the same fire that ignited the burning bush, that jolted Moses and made him take off his shoes and exclaim, "This place is Holy Ground."

*This place is Holy Ground.* I try to absorb these words from the Old Testament. I want to situate myself within the fullness of this understanding and push my contemplation beyond old limiting notions that relegate God to some abstract heaven.

The book of *Wisdom* declares, "The Spirit of God fills the whole world!" I want to know this world filled with the Spirit of God. I want to press the essence from every moment I am alive on this numinous planet.

Toward the end of his life, Teilhard de Chardin wrote: "Less and less do I see any difference between research and adoration." Teilhard was a paleontologist, a

Jesuit priest and Christian mystic. For him, prayer was a meditation on the Universe, informed by scientific knowledge, open to Mystery. At this moment, here on this cushion, with stars above and flame ahead, the veil of separation is torn asunder and I experience myself enfolded in the whole.

I reflect upon how technology has given us the capacity to extend our senses, to see and hear what has always been there but could only be intuited before. We have suddenly been given a glimpse of the footprints of God embedded in the cosmos.

We come out of thirteen billion years of unfolding; we are vital dust, a further development of the original fireball. In this morning prayer I try to locate myself in our galactic neighborhood. I have learned that the galaxy in which I pray is 100,000 light years wide, and that a single light year spans 6 trillion miles. I have been told that our nearest neighbor, the Andromeda Galaxy, is 2.3 million light years away. I shudder at the magnitude of space and time. I know we are located in vastness, in the vast heart of God. Although I sit still and firm during this hour of meditation, I know full well that Earth is rotating at 900 miles per hour. Our planet is orbiting the sun at 68,000 miles per hour. We are revolving as a solar system around the galaxy core at 450,000 miles per hour. And our galaxy, in turn, is rushing away from its neighbors at more than a million miles per hour, in this ever-expanding Universe. I feel the energy of motion and movement, the joy of being part of a great dance. I imagine God dancing too with wild abandon through the farthest reaches of the cosmos.

"Abide in me as I abide in you." These words in the Gospel of John take on new meaning. I know today that the place where the Divine abides is much vaster than I can imagine. "Abide in me" means "abide in my vastness, abide in my Universe." My eyes reach out through the skylight. The deeper within I go in prayer, the farther I move out into the cosmos. Inner and outer become one.

This is what the mystics of our Christian tradition understood as they went deeper into the inner experience of God. They experienced a harmonization of their lives with the greater rhythms of existence. They knew by faith what science knows empirically: that the Universe is charged with the presence and reality of the Divine.

These mystics invited the fire of contemplation to transform them into a union of love with all of creation. They understood that Divine Radiance floods the Universe, making all things holy. I know this too in a deep intuitive way, especially at this moment. I think we all do.

The night sky begins to give way to the dawn, as the Milky Way becomes a faint memory this morning. I remember the words of Annie Dillard, "The world has two kinds of nuns; there are those inside and those outside of convents. Whichever kind she is, the nun's vocation is contemplation of the real."

The bell rings. The hour of prayer has come to a close. I rise, blow out the prayer candle, extinguishing the flame. Yet I know that the Fire within the fire of all things still burns in every creature, galaxy, and star — and in every person who hungers for the Holy.

## Day Three

On this third day of retreat I feel the silence deepening in myself as well as among my companions. It is a relief to fast from speaking for awhile and to give myself over to the fecundity of sacred silence.

I am accompanied in spirit on this retreat by two modern-day Desert Fathers: the late Thomas Merton, Trappist monk and writer, and Thomas Berry, Passionist priest and cultural historian. Both have been major influences in my life: Thomas Merton, beginning in 1978 when I read his first book, *The Seven Story Mountain*, which is the story of his life as a writer and intellectual, leading up to his entry into a Trappist monastery. I was on a spiritual quest myself and was also preparing to enter a Passionist monastery. The words of Merton had a clarity and honesty about them that helped strengthen my resolve.

Thomas Berry became a living mentor for me after I had entered the monastery. He and I were in the same Passionist Congregation, and he became my teacher and friend. In 1991 during my Final Vow Ceremony, Thomas Berry gave me the ring of final profession that not only sealed my commitment as a vowed woman in the church but also wedded me to a passionate love affair with the Divine as revealed in the universe story.

In the tradition of the fourth century Desert Fathers and Mothers who fled to the arid wilds to wrestle with the demons and find God, both Merton and Berry have gone into their own deserts and have come out on the other side of that struggle. It is an ancient custom for a seeker in quest of the wisdom of these fathers and mothers of the desert to approach them with a question. In an imaginative dialogue, I engage each Abba in this way.

“Abba Merton, Have you seen into the nature of reality?”

One day while visiting the statues of Buddha at Polonnaruwa, I had the following experience: Barefoot and undisturbed, my feet in wet grass, wet sand. Then the silence of the extraordinary faces. The great smiles, huge yet subtle. Looking at these figures I was suddenly, almost forcibly, jerked clean of the habitual half-tied vision of things, and an inner clearness, clarity, as if exploding from the rocks themselves, became evident and obvious. The rock, all matter, all life is charged with Dharmakaya ... everything is emptiness and everything is compassion.<sup>1</sup>

“Abba Berry, Where can one find God?”

The deep Mystery of the Divine is revealed in every being, but in a supreme manner within the comprehensive unity of the whole. The universe itself is the primary revelation of the Divine. To speak of God is to bring to mind the great silent fire at the beginning of time from which the universe emerged.<sup>2</sup>

Of Merton they said, “He was on the edge of a great realization.”<sup>3</sup> Of Berry they may say, “He passed over that edge.”

## Day 4

It is mid-morning, another warm sunny day with the West River tumbling in wild abandon after last night's thunderstorm. We gather in our prayer space for the celebration of the Eucharist. I am moved by the simplicity of the elements of bread and wine, the hands raised in blessing, the starkness of the recited words, "This is my body given for you. This is my blood poured out for you."

These words flow from an ancient text thirteen billion years in the making — a text that tells the story of sacrifice and grace. These very words have been spoken by supernovas, galaxies, plants, animals, carbon, lovers, women giving birth, martyrs of the faith, Jesus the Christ, and all of us today.

We are the universe gathered in this moment, in this space, celebrating its profound singularity. This explosion in motion is one radiant being: incarnate, conscious, Christic, undivided.

The basket of bread and cup of wine are passed from one hand to the next, in communion. I eat the body; I drink the blood. There is actually no "I" doing this, only thirteen billion years of holy celebration in joyful conviviality!

## Day 5

I begin my pre-dawn prayer by chanting in song the words of St. Elizabeth of the Trinity:

Changeless and calm  
Deep Mystery  
Ever more deeply  
Rooted in Thee.

The repetition of this verse grounds my spirit. At the same time, my eyes gaze at a poster on the wall: a photograph of the Andromeda Galaxy. I can almost see this, our closest neighbor, swirling within a cosmos that is ever becoming, expanding, and changing. And so, I become the meeting place of ancient Christian tradition and modern scientific discovery. The integration of both form the matrix of my prayer. Each perspective is needed: the view inward that the Christian tradition in its sustained contemplation and sacred texts offers, and the view outward — the telescopic revelation into Mystery that science articulates.

The paradox of the Divine in an evolving universe is that the glory of the Divine is at once the radiant, complete, and changeless ground of all that is. Yet the Divine is also the incessant urge to manifest deeper and deeper expressions of wholeness and integration.

The universe itself manifests this mystery in its very structure. The force of expansion present from the very beginning and continuing today offers the space for distinction, for a multiplicity of identities to emerge.

This expansion is balanced by the gravitational attraction embracing each and all, bringing forth the synergies of community. The compassionate curve of cosmic space-time is sufficiently closed to maintain coherence and at the same time sufficiently open to allow for continued creativity. There is something of the holy embrace of God in the very structure of the universe, changeless and changing.

Throughout the day I contemplate these principles, this tumbling integration of the ancient and inward with the modern and outward. I contemplate what it means to be participating in an Ecozoic retreat. Perhaps it is the task of those yearning to usher in the Ecozoic Era to joyfully and creatively manifest this paradox in our own lives, in our own ways of being. We are drawn to become living embodiments of the Divine, the perfect ground of all that is, in a world that is still deeply divided yet moving toward wholeness.

## **Day 6**

It is late evening and I am reflecting on a recent phone conversation with Thomas Berry in which he told me, "We are opening into a new age of Mary." I recall, too, a dream I had: the Black Madonna appeared to me in a field in her Christian manifestation as Our Lady of Czestachowa.

This image of Mary resides deep in my Polish roots. I have loved Our Lady of Czestachowa, the Black Madonna, all my life. For me, she announces the Mystery manifesting its radiance in flesh. She is Christ Bearer, matter impregnated with Spirit. She is woman of grace, accepting her own body as the chalice of the Spirit.

There is a beautiful icon of Our Lady of Czestachowa before me in our small monastery chapel. I placed the icon on the wall when we set up this space. At the same time I placed the photo of the Andromeda Galaxy there too. It was my attempt to visually situate the Tradition within the context of the universe story.

I find serenity in the Black Madonna and kneel before her now as I have done hundreds of times before in a receptive gesture of prayer. My back is bowed and my hands are open. This Madonna is deeply mysterious. I cannot penetrate the secret of her face. She embodies a divine calm, a concentrated self awareness. I am hungry for her guidance and wisdom; my eyes are teeth, and I receive her as a wafer in communion.

Many years ago a priest from Poland told me that the Black Madonna, most famously venerated in the Church at Jasna Gora, is really cosmic red. The painter's intuition was that as this Mary descended to us from the heavens she burned through the atmosphere and darkened. She is dark from holding sacred fire in her matter. Yes, this Madonna gazes into the distance, far beyond where my own gaze will go. Her vision reaches from "end to end." In truth, her vision knows no end, spiraling into the unlimited reaches of the cosmos. Her gaze demands a reinsertion back into the sacred community of life.

The body of the Black Madonna has emerged from thirteen billion years of universe unfolding. She holds the memories of galaxies, stars, supernovas, and planets. She mirrors back to me the mysterious darkness that surrounds our solar system and the vast space into which our galaxy is expanding. In the deep curve of her body, often bent over the Christ Child in loving embrace, she reflects the great compassionate curve of the universe. In the center of her matter rests Divinity. Matter and spirit are one.

This Black Madonna of Czestachowa has long been worshipped as "The One Who Leads the Way." The radiance that shines through her darkness is indeed magnetic. She teaches me how to love my body and how to bring forth the Mystery embodied in my own flesh for the life of the world. Wherever the Black

Madonna is found there is deep silence, there is solitude. I find myself pilgrimaging to places filled with her presence.

Praying before her in the stillness of this night I hear her say, "All matter is holy. Divinity is revealed in every being."

## **Day 7**

The person assigned to give me spiritual guidance during this retreat offers me this possibility on our penultimate day. She suggests, "Be still in the monastery you are."

The monastery I am is the vastness of the universe itself. I know this, yet I wonder if my spiritual director had any idea as to how I would interpret her guiding words? Bringing the full universe into Christian experience is still a novel and minority movement within my Catholic tradition. But for those of us who have awakened to this possibility, it is a wondrous opportunity.

Many years ago while sitting on my prayer cushion, I received two gifts from an ancient holy figure during an active session of imagination. The gifts were the sword of discrimination and the flute of tenderness. I have cherished the sword and flute ever since, and have spent my days in the monastery allowing the wisdom inherent in those gifts to unfold.

Today I consider ways of using the sword of discrimination to cut through the pathology of these times. The sword enables me to take in the destruction going on around the planet, to open myself safely for deeply grieving these losses, and then to slice through the darkness with a cry of "No more!" The flute, in turn, gives my soul space to respond in a wholesome and holy way.

In a ritual gesture I offer the sword to the human community. I step into the center of the mandala which I have created in the woods out of pine branches and golden rod. In this sacred circle surrounded by the song of birds and buzz of insects, I hold an imaginary sword high in the air. May this sword slice through our inability to recognize Earth as a revelation of the Divine. I offer the flute of tenderness, too. I offer the flute to every life form on this planet and to the children of the future.

## **Day 8**

Every morning when we gather to pray here in our monastery, whether or not we are on retreat, each of us wraps a colored shawl over our shoulders to connect us to a particular moment of grace in the universe story. The color one chooses may change from time to time, depending upon what aspect of the cosmic drama we find personally engaging. The shawl I have chosen is red. To me, red depicts the fireball at the beginning of time.

During this final day of retreat, I drape myself with the cosmic red shawl and feel the stupendous activity of the fireball alive within me. I am moved to write a prayer of intention for my re-entry into the world and to recite each day in our new religious community, which I and my cofounders have called Sisters of the Earth Community.

O Divine Wisdom, you who were present in the Holy Fire  
at the beginning of time —  
Give us Light and Guidance.

You who introduced the first partnership of hydrogen and helium —  
Teach us how to combine our energies to give birth to the Ecozoic Era.

You who seeded the dark of space with galaxies and stars —  
Gift us with abundance.

You who hold all things together in the Holy Embrace  
of the curvature of space —  
Keep us grounded and expansive.

You who were there at the sacrifice of Tiamat,  
our grandmother star —  
Teach us to give Everything to the will of the Divine.

In a moment of grace, Earth learned to capture sunlight —  
Help us to photosynthesize the Light of Christ  
and to become food for the future.

With awe and reverence we step into the flow  
of thirteen billion years of universe unfolding.

We are a further phase change of the original fireball.  
We claim that heritage and say YES to the evolutionary  
potential that is calling us forward and demanding  
that we reinvent ourselves as a species.

May we shape a monastic life coherent with our place in the universe.  
May we come to understand the implications of this.  
May we advance consciousness for the sake of the whole.  
May we become expressions of wholeness in this deeply divided world.

We place our highest gifts at the service of this call,  
at the service of Divine Love itself.

As Sisters of the Earth Community, we turn to you Mary,  
in your manifestation as the Black Madonna.  
We ask you to awaken us to the sacredness of matter  
in our own bodies, in all of life, and in Earth itself.

We call out to the voices of our ancestors —  
Give us guidance.

We call out to the unborn children of all species —  
What do you ask of us?



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<sup>1</sup> The Thomas Merton quotation is from *The Seven Mountains of Merton*, by Michael Lott, 1984 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin), p. 560.

<sup>2</sup> The Thomas Berry "response" is an adaptation of his *The Great Work*, 1999 (New York: Bell Tower), p. ?, and the character Thomas in Brian Swimme's *The Universe is a Green Dragon*, 1984 (Santa Fe: Bear & Company), p. 27.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Lott, p. 552.