

The Good Earth

Local Nuns Draw Their Inspiration From The Glorious Gifts of Land, Sea and Sky

By Lana Bortolot

The more clearly we can focus our attention on the wonders and realities of the universe about us, the less taste we shall have for destruction."

When Rachel Carson penned these words in "The Real World Around Us" in 1954, she encouraged people to consider more carefully the relationship between humans and the natural world. The author of "Silent Spring," the 1962 landmark book that jump-started the ecology movement, Carson likely had little idea that her ideas would find their parallel in spiritual teachings.

Some 50 years later, a group of women on the Upper West Side is doing just that — maintaining an ecological standard not only in how they live and consume but also in how they practice their faith. Tapping into an emergent trend known as Eco-Theology (sometimes called Eco-Christianity), this Episcopalian order of 19 nuns bases its apostolate on a concern for the escalating earth crisis.

Founded in the monastic tradition, the Community of the Holy Spirit realigned its ministry about five years ago to live in an earth-respectful way. The order maintains a brownstone complex on West 113th Street, housing 10 women, and a farm/education center in Brewster, N.Y., where the other sisters live. Together, they work the land, produce food and engage in earth-centered community outreach.

"The first thing that brings people here is a call to God, but we have made an intentional shift in our direction to live a sustainable life," says Sister Faith Margaret, a 19-year member of the order. "We describe ourselves as a mixed community — a mix of contemplation and action. It's a lifestyle choice and a spiritual choice."

Aside from practical habits — water and energy conservation,



Garden of Paradise: Serene setting

helping out community-supported gardens, composting and purchasing fairly traded products — the sisters have adopted a spiritual regard for the earth based on creation. They view the planet as a God-given gift instead of a God-given right.

"This is the creation, and God gave it to us to do with as we want. But dominion is where we get tripped up," Sister Faith Margaret says. "If we see it instead as stewardship, there's a whole different

perspective centered around a necessity to sustain the earth. When we ask ourselves, 'What do the unborn ask of us,' we can frame our work around that question. And that work is to sustain the earth for future generations."

The Community of the Holy Spirit is but one of hundreds of faith-based groups rethinking the human-earth relationship. From orders of green nuns to formally organized interfaith energy initiatives across the country, there is a religious response to issues such as global warming and resource abuse. New York has an Interfaith Power and Light organization (www.nyipl.org), part of a national network under the umbrella of the Regeneration Project, which seeks to "expand, deepen and leverage the link between religious faith and environmental responsibility."

Many are inspired by the teachings of Thomas Berry, an early eco-theologian who spent significant time in New York City. He taught at Fordham University from 1966 to 1979 and founded the Riverdale Center of Religious Research in 1970, where he remained director until 1987. Now in his 90s, Berry is still oft-quoted by earth and religious scholars alike.

"Thomas Berry put this movement on the map," says Ellen Davis, a professor of Bible and Practical Theology at Duke Divinity School in Durham, N.C. "He made the connection early on, but it's only really taken off in the last 15 or so years. A dozen years ago, [students] had no notion this was theologically significant, but that has drastically changed. Now I teach in response to students asking for this topic, considering this a part of their future ministry, and indicating to me, the church world has changed."

A former professor at Union Theological Seminary in Chelsea, Davis

will speak at a retreat hosted by the Community of the Holy Spirit on Oct. 15. "Finding our Place: Steps Toward a Biblical Ecology," which costs \$50 and is open to the public but requires reservations (212-932-8098), will address biblical insights into the current crisis in relations among God, humans and nonhumans, including the earth.



Sister Faith Margaret: Sustains earth

Retreats are but one of several ways in which the sisters keep current with their green ministry. Several nuns are involved with Genesis Farm, an earth-literacy center in Blairswood, N.J., and the Neighborhood Energy Network. They also attend conferences such as the recent Eco-Metropolis Conference in New York City.

Lucy Kuemmerle, a Riverside Drive resident, has been a lay associate of the community since 1985. For the past 12 years, she has tended to the garden behind the West 113th Street brownstones.

"I don't have a developed sense of [the ministry] like the sisters have, but I like to think the garden is a small parcel of God's earth, and I feel honored to take part in it," she says. "The sisters really keep pace with the philosophy. There's something deeper and profoundly interesting in what they do." ■

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