



# REVERENCING AND RESTORATION: Caring for Earth

♦ a Lenten Project of the Southeast Portland Vicariate ♦ 5th Sunday of Lent ♦ March 13, 2005 ♦ "Life Restored in the Place Where We Are" ♦

**"I will put my spirit in you that you may live." Ezekiel 37:14**

**A** people in exile, in a desolate valley of bones cry out in despair for LIFE. In Bethany a family and community say to Jesus "where were you, didn't you know our friend was sick and died?" To each the Holy One, God makes a bold promise - things will be as they were; you will be restored to life ... in fact I can make a promise to you of NEW LIFE in the Spirit! Imagine that, new life after such misery!

We learn in life that it is important, and in fact necessary to call out in pain when we experience loss; to acknowledge the mystery in suffering. It is almost as if when we speak the wondering, the loss, the question, the pain, we get it out of ourselves thus creating a space for new life in the Spirit. It does seem that the work of restoration then begins.

Our earth, God's creation is oppressed. "Earth's climate is warming to dangerous levels; 90 percent of the world's fisheries are depleted; coastal development and pollution are causing decline in ocean health; shrinking habitat threatens many species and over 95 percent of the contiguous US forests have been lost."<sup>1</sup> Our own Columbia River each year is filled with tons of carcinogens. We do cry out in disbelief ... and thus we create a space for restorative action.

Mary Evelyn Tucker from the Forum for Religion and Ecology says that world religions and spiritual traditions "play a key role (in restoration) because they are the repository of key attitudes and values which have shaped individuals and cultures over the millennium."<sup>2</sup>

In previous weeks we have focused on values that guide our response to the environmental and social crisis of our time: A Sacramental Universe; Respect for ALL Life; Protection of the Common Good and Solidarity with the most oppressed. It is our responsibility individually and corporately to enflame these values and set our energies at the service of the whole community of life to make the promise of New Life in the Spirit real for all.

**Today we listen to the stories of three people from our Columbia River Watershed** who flesh out these values in the Place where they live. In the words of the Columbia River Pastoral Letter, "the watershed seen through eyes alive with faith and spirituality can be a revelation of God's presence, an occasion of grace and blessings." May we see our watershed in new ways and be lead to action on behalf of the WHOLE COMMUNITY of LIFE.

We cannot help but also remember Sr. Dorothy Stang, SNDdeNamur who was killed recently in Brazil. She gave her life, her energies to the protection of the Amazon Rainforest and the rights of indigenous farmers. After her death, 8 million acres of forest reserve were set aside by the Brazilian government. RESTORATION ... new life in the Spirit.

**The Spirituality of Forestry.** I am a member of the Idaho Benedictine Sisters living near Cottonwood, Idaho. Our monastery overlooks the Camas Prairie, part of the ancient homeland of the Nez Perce Indian Tribe. As a community we own and are responsible for 1,400 acres, the largest portion of that being forested. We see ourselves as intimately related to this land and we have made a corporate commitment to its care.

In 1993 we adopted our *Philosophy of Land Use* which expresses our belief that land is a gift and through it we receive our life and sustenance. The contemplative environment it provides constantly renews our inner spirits. We experience interconnectedness with the land and recognize our responsibility to reverence and care for the resources it provides. All decisions that we make concerning our land flow from this responsibility.

Some of these decisions have been of a very practical nature, such as rejuvenating the orchard originally planted by our pioneer Sisters, continuing our extensive vegetable garden and establishing an herb garden. But as the largest portion of our land is wooded, our biggest investment has been the careful management of the forest. In 1989 I became the land manager of our Convent property. Working with foresters, consultants and state officials, we are now implementing a forest management plan with the health and productivity of the forest in mind.

Benedict's way of life has endured for 15 centuries because he insisted his followers follow common sense. We can achieve a healthy, holistic lifestyle if we know how to find balance. The longer I work in our woods the more I am convinced that balance is also the key to good forest management. We stand in wide-eyed and open-mouthed wonder at the mystery of life expressed in the forest around us even as we use the resources it provides. How essential it is to remember that we are guests on this planet, not owners or renters. Then our response will be to treat everything with reverence and a sense of gratitude.<sup>3</sup>

*By Sister Carol Ann Wassmuth, OSB. Sister Wassmuth serves as the land manager for the Monastery of St. Gertrude in Cottonwood, Idaho.*

**The Greensong of Nature.** The qualities of nature enlighten my soul. In the quiet solitude of the forest, I find insight. I reflect on the glory of creation, the burden of my stewardship, my place in the world. The sanctity I see in nature comes from nature's effect on me.

As a Nez Perce Indian, I grew up walking paths my ancestors walked, drinking from streams out of which my forefathers drank. Their connection to the nature that sustained them is my connection to not only nature, but to them, as well. The deep-seated sense of place that this connection gives me is a fundamental aspect of my identity. I have no monopoly on sense of place; indeed I believe that a deep-rooted connection to the land that surrounds us is not only possible, but also essential to each and every person's welfare. The tribes of this region have a firmly established sense of place because they lived as if they were a part of the very land itself. They opened themselves to nature and what it could teach.

I strive to be open to find the sanctity in all of nature, however a cedar grove near my childhood home embodies holiness. In this grove are towering old-growth cedars, reaching to heaven like pillars in a cathedral. There are luxuriant ferns, drawing in the pure water from the murmuring brook flowing through the grove. Animals who have made the grove their home casually bask in the safety of the forest. The sacredness of the grove rejuvenates my soul, just as the moist, fragrant air rejuvenates my lungs.

When I venture into the cedar grove, life surrounds me—green life. The deep, dark green of cedar boughs; the light, youthful green of grasses; the soft, rich green of moss. If I listen hard enough, I can hear the grove speak to me—speaking not through the

tongue of angels nor the words of man, but through the subtle greensong of nature. It is in nature where I feel closest to God, most in harmony with the earth, most at peace with myself. Nature is sacred; nature makes *me* sacred.

Find your own sacred grove and listen; allow yourself to truly hear the land. With patience and determination, it will tell you how to live in this place, and in so doing, you sanctify the land—you sanctify your very soul.

*By Jeremy FiveCrows, a member of the Nez Perce Tribe. Mr. FiveCrows is the tribal liaison and publications editor of the Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission.*

**Memory.** "I remember the first time we went up the Wrangell Narrows in Southeast Alaska in our fishing vessel, the *Blue Mist*. Salmon were leaping everywhere. We could not avoid seeing them except by closing our eyes. I knew then that it was a mistake to think that there was only one Eden. The God who created such abundance is a God of unimagined splendor, the God of Eden everywhere... The northern voyage to Alaska shows us annually what abundance is, and it shocks us into the knowledge that it was once like that on the Columbia... And I suspect it was something very like a collapse of fish stocks and with it a collapse of the small communities' way of life that occurred on the Sea of Galilee [in Jesus' time]... Galilee, which Josephus had called 'the ambition of nature' contained the lake where the fishermen were saying, 'We fished all night and caught nothing.' The words I hear are filled with pain."<sup>4</sup>

When I wrote those words, I was conscious of how important memory is in the fishing culture of the

Columbia River gillnetters. Our fishery, like many worldwide, relies on oral transmission of information from generation to generation and maintenance of tradition and custom, passed down in families. My own work on behalf of the Columbia's salmon relies on refreshing my memory by experiencing abundant fish runs each year in Alaska. My other inspiration is the journals of the Lewis and Clark expedition, which established a baseline of knowledge about what was here 200 years ago, a memory in writing.<sup>5</sup>

Christianity is a religion of memory: "Do this in remembrance of me." Without memory, of what Eden was, what the Columbia was, what salmon runs were, we would have no baseline, no way to gauge our efforts on behalf of the environment. Whether our environmental work is hands-on stream restoration, attending meetings to witness to our desire to treat the earth well, or prayer on behalf of creation, we rely on our memories and those of others of a more pristine environment. May all our work on behalf of creation be done "in remembrance."

*By Irene Martin, an ordained Episcopal priest. Rev. Martin is a writer and has served on State boards and advisory panels regarding fishing policies. She has fished commercially for salmon with her husband on the Columbia River and in Southeast Alaska.*

**What each person has in common** is a profound sense that the Place where they are is MORE than meets the eye. It is indeed a revelation of God's presence and it is this belief that motivates their lives. With gratitude!

**Now it's your turn.** Take a piece of paper and write your own sense of place and your response in faith to the needs of this community of life.

**Acknowledgements:** 1 *God's Earth is Sacred: An Open Letter to the Church and Society in the U.S.* 2 from a talk given by Mary Evelyn Tucker, 3 Sr. Carol Ann Wassmuth, *Idaho Benedictines – A Balanced Approach to Care of the Land and The Spirituality of Forestry*, 4 Irene Martin, *Sea Fire, Tales of Jesus and Fishing* (New York, The Crossroad Publishing Co, 2003), pp. 71-72., 5 Martin, *Lewis and Clark in the Land of the Wahkiakums* (Tollhouse, Ca.: Scrub Jay Press, 2003)