

Holy Ground: Where Catholic Tradition and the Universe Story Meet

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Reflections from an Ecozoic Retreat: The term Ecozoic means 'house of life' and refers to the emerging era in the story of planet Earth where we as humans come to understand our place within the comprehensive context of the numinous universe in which we live.

Day One

I have arrived at a monastery on the East Coast and am beginning an 8 day silent contemplative prayer retreat. I am going back and forth between texts that will serve as bedrock and guide for the upcoming days. Engaging in the ancient Christian practice of Lextio Divina or Sacred Reading, I ponder the following words from an Old Testament Text:

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

At the same time I sit with an image of M100, a spiral galaxy that sits at a distance of 60 million light years from us. This image was taken by the Hubble Telescope whose powerful lenses probe into deep space and attempt to answer some of our oldest questions- Where do we come from? Who are we? and Why are we here?

Light from M100 began its journey to Earth when Earth was recovering from its fourth mass extinction, the terminal cretaceous which eliminated the dinosaurs. Humans were not yet even on the scene! The light from M100 takes approximately 60 million years to travel to Earth, to get to the retina of our human eyes. When we look at M100 we are seeing ancient light. This takes some time to absorb. As a species we are only beginning to experience cosmic depth perception!

In the late evening I am able to look through a telescope and contemplate the night sky. 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.”

At the heart of the word contemplation is the Latin word temple. M100 is like a vigil light burning in the temple of the cosmos. I wonder if M100 is still there

or did it go out a few million years ago in a supernova celebration? M100 deserves a better name! Something like Luminosity, Radiance, God Bearer.

Day Two

The bell rings at 5am, an early morning call to prayer. It is the beginning of the monastic day. It is time for Morning Vigil. At this hour, all is in darkness except for the one candle lighting the prayer space. I take my place on the cushion and join the others gathered for the hour of contemplative prayer.

This time of Vigils is the night watch hour, a time 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 this literally. There is a large skylight above my head and in this predawn darkness I can see the shining stars of the 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 12 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, stone and bird. 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.”

I try to absorb these words from the Old Testament; “This place is Holy Ground.” I want to situate myself within the fullness of this understanding and push my contemplation beyond old limiting notions which subscribe 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 and situate myself in its larger context.

Towards the end of his life Teilhard de Chardin wrote:

“Less and less do I see any difference between research and adoration.”

For Teilhard as for many poets and mystics, prayer was a meditation on the Universe, informed by knowledge, open to Mystery.

I reflect upon how technology has given us the capacity to extend our senses, to be able to see and hear what has always been there but what we were unable to know with unaided senses. We have suddenly been given a glimpse of the footprints of God embedded in the cosmos as we come to understand how the Universe works.

We come out of 12 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.

The galaxy in which I pray is 100,000 light years wide. A single light year is equal to 6 trillion miles. Our nearest neighbor, the Andromeda Galaxy is 2.3 million light years away. This takes some time to absorb. We are located in vastness, in the vast heart of God.

Although I sit still and firm during this time of meditation I reflect upon the fact that the Earth is rotating at 900 miles an hour. It is orbiting the sun at 19 miles/second. We are moving as a solar system at 450,000 miles/hour around the center of our galaxy and our galaxy is expanding at 22,400 miles/minute.

This is the context in which I find myself as I sit down to pray. Things are anything but still. I imagine God dancing with wild abandon through the farthest reaches of the cosmos.

In today's Gospel of John the words, "Abide in me as I abide in you" take on new meaning. The place where the Divine abides is much vaster than we can imagine. Abide in me means "abide in my vastness" , "abide in my Universe."

There is a realization taking place within me, as my eyes reach out through the skylight, that the deeper in I go in prayer the farther out I go in the cosmos. Inner and outer are 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 allowed 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. 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. Before the bell rings to call this hour of prayer to a close 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 as the first glimmers of dawn appear in the morning sky. The hour of prayer is over. I blow out the prayer candle, extinguishing the flame. Yet I know full well 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 Two

I am accompanied in spirit on this retreat by two modern day Desert Fathers; Thomas Merton, the Trappist monk and writer and Thomas Berry, Passionist priest and cultural historian, both of whom have been major influences in my life and who have with intellectual precision and purity of heart pondered the deep questions of existence.

In the tradition of the 4th century Desert Fathers and Mothers who fled to the desert 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.

In an imaginative dialogue I approach each Abba with a question as was the ancient custom when seeking out a father or mother of the desert.

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

“One day while visiting the huge carved 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.” 1

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.” 2

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

- 1- Michael Lott, pg 560, The Seven Mountains of Merton.
- 2- Thomas Berry, Private Conversation.
- 3- Michael Lott, pg 552, The Seven Mountains of Merton.

Day Four

On this 4th day of retreat we gather in the chapel 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 12 billion year text that tells the story of self gift and grace. They 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 celebrating its profound singularity. This explosion in motion is one radiant being; incarnate, conscious, Christic and undivided.

The basket of bread and cup of wine are passed around the chapel at communion and we all partake of this single energy event. I eat the bread and drink from the cup. There is actually no “I” doing this, only 12 billion years of holy celebration in joyful conviviality! The whole journey is this moment as it is the moment of the absolute future of Christ fulfillment radiating back to the present.

Day Five

I begin my morning prayer in chant with 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 photo of the Andromeda Galaxy located in the prayer space, swirling within a cosmos that is ever becoming, expanding, and changing.

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 from the microscope that the Christian Tradition in its sustained contemplation and sacred texts offers as well as 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 both the radiant, complete and changeless ground of all that is and the unceasing demand to manifest deeper and deeper expressions of wholeness and integration.

The universe itself manifests this mystery in its very structure. The curvature of space- time keeps the universe from collapsing, while the gravitational attraction holds all things together and enables the universe to blossom. This compassionate curve 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 here in the very structure of the universe itself. Changeless and changing!

It seems to me that the herculean task of the Ecozoic Era is to manifest this paradox as our humanity. It is the challenge to be human beings who are living embodiments of the Divine, the perfect ground of all that is, in a world that is still deeply divided yet moving towards wholeness.

Day Six

This morning I am reflecting on a recent phone conversation with Thomas Berry in which he said, "We are opening into a new age of Mary." I recall a dream I had where the Black Madonna appeared to me in a field in her Christian manifestation as Our Lady of Czestachowa.

This image runs deep in my Polish roots and I have loved her all my life. She announces the Mystery manifesting its radiance in her 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 in the monastery chapel. I sit before her in an open gesture of prayer. This Madonna is mysterious. I

cannot penetrate the secret of her face. She embodies a divine calm, a concentrated awareness of herself. 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 is really cosmic red. The painter's intuition was that as she descended to us from the heavens she burned through the atmosphere and darkened. She is Mary, dark from holding sacred fire in her matter.

This Madonna gazes into the distance, beyond the horizon. 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.

Her body has come out of 12 billion years of universe unfolding. She holds the memories of galaxies, stars, supernovas and planets within. 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 a 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 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 lives there is deep silence, there is solitude. I find myself going to places filled with her presence. Praying before her in this still, dark chapel I hear her say, "All matter is holy. Divinity is revealed in every being as well as within the comprehensive unity of the whole."

Day 7

The person directing my retreat gives me a line to break open when she says, "Be still in the monastery you are."

The monastery I am in is the vastness of the universe itself. I wonder if this director has any idea of the implications of her suggestion? I don't suppose she does.

Many years ago while sitting on my prayer cushion I received two gifts from an

ancient holy figure during an active imagination session. Those 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 them 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 just so much of the destruction going on around the planet and no more. The flute gives my soul space to respond in a wholesome and holy way.

In a ritual gesture I offer the sword to the human community. May it slice through our inability to recognize the Earth as a revelation of the Divine. I also offer the flute of tenderness to every life form on the planet and to the children of the future.

Day 8

Every morning when we gather to pray in my monastery in Vermont we each wrap a colored shawl over our shoulders to connect us to a particular moment of grace in the universe story. My shawl is the color red depicting the fireball at the beginning of time.

This morning on my final day of retreat I drape myself with the cosmic red shawl and feel the stupendous activity of the fireball alive in me. Leaning over the paper on my desk I write the following prayer of intention which will be recited each day in our new community of Sisters of Earth.

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 seeded the dark of space with galaxies and stars -
Gift us with abundance.

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

You 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 photosynthesize the Light of Christ and become food for the
future.

With awe and reverence we step into the flow of 12 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 and 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?

