

*Interfacing the Universe Story, the Christian Story,  
the Earth Story, and the IHM Story*

A Working Paper for Reflection and Discussion  
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## SONNET FOR CREATION

If Life's missed loves surround me at its close,  
O let not one of them be Wisdom's boon  
That brings to light the wonder of the moon  
And interplays of galaxies God chose  
To grace the deep blue of a summer night;  
Or rainbow's hues to savor after pain  
And gentle winds in tune with healing rain,  
Or trees in flower when Spring is at its height.  
O let not hues of autumn's red and gold  
And aura of its fire go by unseen,  
Nor usage blind me to a snowflake's sheen  
That graces field and tree in winter's cold.  
Let reverence be mine while time shall last:  
I kneel in awe where Beauty holds me fast.

Judine King, IHM (1910-2005) *Reeds of Singing Fire*, p. 19.

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## *Interfacing the Universe Story, the Christian Story, the Earth Story, and the IHM Story*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Reflecting on the inter-relationship of the scientific story of the universe, the Christian narrative, the earth story today, and our IHM story is challenging and stimulating. These four stories are unique, and each one is amazing. We live in them in an all-at-once way, and while they have different time spans, they are equally important to us. They describe our context; they give us images, symbols, and truths that shape our values. They reveal our life's call and purpose, individually and in community; they source our cultivating God's life in us and circling it about widely in our world today.

While these stories are so interwoven in us, they are also distinct and therefore somewhat separable from one another. The universe narrative is a scientific account of our origins, elaborated largely by Western scientists using the scientific method of theory and empirical verification. Today, the scientific knowledge of our cosmological and evolutionary unfolding is vast. Indeed, we can be astounded by it; it can almost overwhelm our imagination. Science has established that the universe is about 13.7 billion years old, and all that is in it evolved and is connected. It is a story because it has a beginning: the singularity event of the *Big Bang* created time and space. It is also a story that is still unfolding; its plot is not yet fully worked out. In fact we are most likely only a few paragraphs into this story.

In contrast, the Christian story is only about 4000 years old, counting its integral relationship with Jewish history and writings. This story is also a spectacular one. It makes wondrous claims, some from fact and some from other forms of apprehension,

about its narrative center, the historical Jesus of Nazareth. He is proclaimed as the icon of God in our midst, the Christ, the one who, filled with the Holy Spirit, preaches and teaches and realizes the reign of God on this earth, and who calls and empowers disciples to do the same. This story is unfolding, too. It has a long and layered history, one that is filled with many other stories as different human cultures encountered the Christ event and made it their own. While its unfolding has been rather contentious at times in its processes of transformation, it has yielded lasting transporting truths and transforming actions. It is a story centered on life altering values. It is a dynamic story, one whose telling is meant to take its listeners into it intimately. It is the hearers of this story that keep it alive and reveal its transformational power today.

The earth story began around 4.6 billion years ago, the planet being shaped during a long process in a cooling universe. The stunning fact in this narrative is the appearance of life about 4 billion years ago in the form of single-celled bacteria. Much later, about 525 million years ago, biology had its own *Big Bang* in the period of the Cambrian explosion, a time of life forms expansion and diversification. Our human origins stretch back into this period, emerging first as *homo habilis* about 1.9 million years ago and *homo sapiens* only about 200,000 years ago. No one knows the full array and number of species that have appeared and disappeared in our earth history. What we do know is that today species extinction is so high that it threatens the balance of our biosphere. This is a new and very dramatic twist in the earth story and it is by no means a *given* that the bio-story will continue. What is known is that present day *homo sapiens* controls much of the outcome. The *Earth Charter*, issued in 2000, puts focus on

this fact and calls for universal conversion and commitment. There is no doubt that we are at a critical juncture in this story.

The story of the Immaculate Heart of Mary Sisters of Monroe, Michigan is the shortest of our four narratives, beginning only 162 years ago in 1845, though it has roots of course in the slightly older histories of the *Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer* and the *Oblate Sisters of Providence* of Baltimore, Maryland through Louis Florent Gillet and Teresa Maxis Duchemin. This tale is also an astounding one. Gillet and Maxis, responding to the Christian story that had seized them so totally in their individual lives, launched this narrative at an outpost on the Great Lakes in mid-nineteenth century United States with not much more than the vision. It has unfolded dramatically with episodes of tragedy, especially early on, but always with hope. This story has nurtured its participants with astounding love and it has yielded abundant works, fruits of fidelity and trust, which took root in soils around the world. This story claims us all deeply; it has shaped our life purpose and endowed us with the indescribable gifts of community. We are both its hearers and its tellers. We continue to interpret it and shape it through the gifts of God in us. This story too is at a crossroads in its history.

We live in critical times, a *kairos* period in the Christian and cosmic narratives and marker time too in the earth and IHM stories. This paper is offered as a contribution to our Congregational process of reflection on these four stories. Interfacing them may give us some new images, symbols, insights, understandings, and responses as we attend together both to new knowledge and to our empowering traditions. The paper itself of course is a story. It is a narrative, more expository than poetic at this point, and

it is incomplete. It needs the interaction of its readers to challenge it, to correct it, to augment it from their experiences in the four stories. The essay unfolds in four parts, with each having some description, some analysis, and some summary points for integration. Themes interlace throughout, like in a symphony, but an unfinished one. Other motifs will arise no doubt in the playing, the reflective process.

## I. THE SCIENCE STORY OF THE UNIVERSE

“The universe needs to have been expanding for something like fourteen billion years if galaxies are to form, stars are to ignite, elements like carbon are to be synthesized, a solar system incorporating these elements is to be formed around the sun, and human life is to evolve on Earth. Frogs and eagles depend on this fine-tuning of the universe just as much as human beings do. We are all interconnected in the one story of the universe, and we are all made from stardust.”

Denis Edwards, *Ecology at the Heart of Faith*. p. 12.

### A. A Brief Description

Ptolemy’s second century earth-centered cosmology provided a model that was commonly accepted in Western culture until the sixteenth century when Copernicus and Galileo proposed instead a sun-centered view. Despite resistance from religious authorities, the sun-centered position gradually took hold. It directed scientific inquiry, including Newton’s discovery of gravity and the laws of motion, and shaped our world view right up to our own times. But now, in less than a century, science has shifted the focus far beyond our solar system and Newton’s mechanistic views of nature to a compelling picture of the universe, judged now to be about 13.7 billion years old and still expanding. Thus, today we have a universe centered cosmology.

The scientific story spills out from a singular event, the *Big Bang* as it is commonly called, a massive unfolding of gases from an unimaginably dense, small, and hot concentration of energy. It is estimated that within the first three minutes of this outpouring the first subatomic protons, neutrons, and electrons appeared and some of

them combined to form helium and other light elements. The universe continued to expand and cool down, gradually creating the conditions for producing hydrogen and other atoms which in turn slowly coalesced into heavier elements. Over the next several billion years, the heavier elements collided and combined, and from massive thermodynamic and gravitational activity, galaxies were formed, billions of them, and each of them with billions of stars. This process is amazing enough to contemplate, but even more so is the fact that it is still going on. Our universe is anything but a static, all-in-place reality: it is an ongoing, dynamic, creating process. Galaxies are forming or merging and solar systems are coming into being now; stars are dying and being born now; life is dying and arising now.

Some 10 or 12 billion years ago, from a colossal gaseous cloud which slowly contracted into a disc-shaped mass, our home galaxy, the Milky Way, was formed. Around 4.6 billion years ago, our sun, a third generation star, took shape in one of the outer arms of the galaxy. Over the next billion years, the rotating planets, including our earth, came into being. The Milky Way galaxy today is very large, about 100,000 light years in diameter with spiral arms rotating around a core about 10, 000 light years thick. It contains up to 400 billion stars and their planets and also clusters and nebulae and comets and meteorites.

As for the size of the known universe itself with its billions more galaxies, writer Bill Bryson gives us some idea:

For us, the universe goes only as far as light has traveled in the billions of years since the universe was formed. This visible universe – the universe we know and can talk about – is a million million million million (that's 1,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000) miles across. But according to most theories the universe at large ... is vastly roomier still. According to [British astronomer Martin] Rees, the number of light-years to the edge of this

larger, unseen universe would be written not 'with ten zeroes, not even with a hundred, but with millions.' In short, there's more space than you can imagine already without going to the trouble of trying to envision some additional beyond (Bryson, 17-18).

This description gives us some space and time dimensions, but also shows the distance science itself has traveled since Ptolemy's earth centered cosmology. Even so, our planet earth remains a central focus for us since it is our immediate context and the only presently known locale for life.

One of the four inner planets, our earth is believed to have been formed about 4.57 billion years ago, and shortly thereafter came its moon. Then, about 3.9 billion years ago, life began when conditions were right for the origin of chemistry, as biologist Ursula Goodenough explains.

Two kinds of chemistry were needed to get life going: the chemistry that generates the so-called building blocks of life – water, carbon dioxide, and small molecules like formaldehyde, methane, and hydrogen sulfide – and the chemistry that allow these to associate into yet larger assemblies called biochemicals.

Gradually, from "tiny specks of matter, about the size of talcum particles, called interstellar dust" and from "deep-sea hydrothermal vents" which allowed water to seep "into fissures in the earth's mantle," the essential molecular building blocks were produced.

small but complex building blocks are thought to have accumulated in the waters of the new earth from the time it formed about 4.5 billion years ago, creating what is often called the 'primal soup.' For our purposes, the most important ingredients of the soup were three kinds of small molecules called sugars, amino acids, and nucleotides, with the nucleotides being of two sorts – ribonucleotides and deoxyribonucleotides. These are important because they prove to be the starting materials for all forms of Earth life.

Goodenough continues: Then, “ about 4 billion years ago, the second kind of chemistry got underway: the formation of biomolecules”, that is, macromolecules constructed from the small molecules found in the primal soup (Goodenough, 19-21). From such a complex process, there was formed “the first progenitor cell from whom all creatures flow” (Goodenough, 27). And thus, from stardust and water and through struggle and extinctions, came life as we know it today.

The scientific account of how life evolved has its roots in the nineteenth century work of French naturalist Jean-Baptiste Lamarck and British naturalist Charles Darwin. While still a matter of some social and religious controversy, evolution is accepted by nearly every professionally trained biologist who has lived in the last fifty years and it is now enjoined with the larger twentieth century cosmological story. By means of natural selection, genetic drift, and adaptation, evolution explains the development of life from its simple beginnings some 4.5 billion years ago to its most complex forms today, including the emergence of the human species from *homo habilis* about 2.5 million years ago to *homo sapiens* some 190,000 years ago. Scientific evolutionary inquiry continues today in such fields as *molecular biology*, which led to the discovery of the structure of DNA by Francis H. Crick and James D. Watson in the 1950's; *sociobiology*, a relatively new field stimulated by the works of E. O. Wilson and Richard Dawkins on the biological basis for the development of culture, including ethics and religion; and the development of the *Gaia Hypothesis* by independent scientist James M. Lovelock and microbiologist Lynn Margulis, a proposal “in which all life, together with the Earth's surface and atmosphere,” is believed to “evolve as a single entity” (Lovelock, 2005).

More could be said regarding the scientific account of the universe and evolution: on the *Big Bang* and the anthropic principle; on the expanding universe and the future *Big Crunch*; on future colliding galaxies, including our own; on the limited life of our sun; on black holes, dark matter, and string theory; on discoveries related to our solar system's planets; on the complex history of species development and extinction; on the implicate universe and multiverse theories, to mention just a few areas. But, hopefully, this brief overview has invoked some insights concerning the long story of the universe and the interconnected character of everything that is.

## **B. Some Analysis of the Enjoined Cosmic and Biological Story**

The account of the development of the universe and the role of evolution has evoked a wide-range of responses. At the ordinary level of perception, most people are astonished by the photos of our Blue Planet from the moon and the pictures of galaxies, exploding stars, and fiery supernovas from the Hubble telescope. Magnificent science videos available today stretch our knowledge and open our hearts to beauty. Believers and unbelievers alike respond in awe to the marvels of the creation unfolding before us. At the level of critical reflection on the relationship of science and religion, however, the response is more complicated. A few positions are outlined here since they permeate our culture and relate in one way or another to the Christian story.

**1. Scientific Naturalism.** Some scientists - such as Steven Weinberg, Carl Sagan, Jacques Monad, and Richard Dawkins - hold that the universe or nature is self-generating according to the laws of physics, natural selection, and random genetic change. For them, the universe is the whole of reality, and it is without purpose. Weinberg, for instance, says that the universe is a vast expanse of cold, dark, mostly

lifeless matter evolving randomly without purpose. God is not needed to be its creating and sustaining source or to explain the universe. The universe evolves, not from purpose, but randomly, on its own. Scientific naturalists also claim that God does not exist because God cannot be known through the scientific method, which they hold to be the only true way to knowledge (Haught, 2006, 1-7; Toolan, 159-164). These scientists are explicit about their atheism, and some, like Richard Dawkins, are even aggressive about it (Dawkins). Some of their writings have reached the best seller lists today and they are stimulating serious discussion on the relationship of scientific knowledge to religious faith and knowing.

**2. Scientific Religious Naturalism.** Other thinkers – such as scientist Ursula Goodenough and philosophers Chet Raymo and David R. Griffin – hold steadfastly to the fundamental character of naturalism, “but they often use religious terminology – words such as *mystery* and *sacred* – to express their sense that nature by itself is deserving of a reverential surrender of the mind” (Haught, 2006, 8). While they sometimes identify themselves as *religious*, they are not theists. They believe in an elegant universe, but one that *is* so, completely from and in itself.

Goodenough says that she shared Weinberg’s cosmic pessimism, admitting a reaction of fear and terror to the universe story and that she “wallowed in its poignant nihilism” for awhile. But then, she found relief:

... I have found a way to defeat the nihilism that lurks in the infinite and the infinitesimal. I have come to understand that I can deflect the apparent pointlessness of it all by realizing that I don’t have to seek a point. In any of it. Instead I can see it as the locus of Mystery. ...

The realization that I needn’t have answers to the Big Questions, needn’t seek answers to the Big Questions, has served as an epiphany. I lie on my back under the stars and the unseen galaxies and I let their enormity wash over me. I assimilate the vastness of the distance, the

impermanence, the *fact* of it all. I go all the way out and then I go all the way down, to the fact of photons without mass and gauge bosons that become massless at high temperatures. I take in the abstractions about forces and symmetries and they caress me, like Gregorian chants, the meaning of the words not mattering because the words are so haunting.

Mystery generates wonder, and wonder generates awe. The gasp can terrify or the gasp can emancipate. As I allow myself to experience cosmic and quantum Mystery, I join the saints and the visionaries in their experience of what they call the Divine ... (Goodenough, 12-13).

Goodenough finds a path between nihilism and theism by declaring the universe *itself* as *Mystery*. She finds meaning in the aesthetics of “cosmic and quantum Mystery” and surrenders any need to know more or to be in communion with more. The universe itself is ultimate.

### **3. Creationism.**

At the other end of the spectrum, there is *Creationism*, a term used generally to refer to theists who take the Genesis accounts of creation as literal, historical accounts. While there are some persons in all theistic religions who hold this view, increasingly the term *Creationism* is being used to refer to certain fundamentalist evangelical Christians, and especially in the United States, who reject the current scientific accounts of the cosmos and evolution, believing that they contradict God’s revelation and therefore cannot be true. Generally speaking, there are two forms of *Creationism*: *Young Earth Creationism* which holds that God created the earth within the last ten thousand years and exactly as described in Genesis; *Old Age Creationism* which accepts the scientific account of the age of the universe and the earth but disagrees with the evolutionary explanation on the origins of life, and particularly human life (Haught, 2000, 26-28). Both forms see science as inherently atheistic and thus a threat to their faith. They choose their faith, as they understand it, over reason and thus refuse to integrate their

understanding of the Christian story with the current science story. The DNA scientist Francis Collins, himself an evangelical Christian, points to the dangers of such a position for both religion and science and pleads for a thoughtful reconsideration to improve the status of both in our current culture (Collins, 171-178).

**4. *Intelligent Design*.** Another group of scientists, including Michael Behe and William Dembski, believe that the cosmic and evolutionary story is not only compatible with theistic belief but even in some sense a verification of it. They argue to an Intelligent Designer God from what is called *the anthropic principle*, first described by physicist Brandon Carter in 1973, and summed up by Jesuit scholar David Toolan as follows:

Using insights from relativity and particle physics, plus observations from astronomy, Carter pointed out that the seemingly arbitrary and unrelated constants in physics have one very odd thing in common: they are precisely the values you need if you want to have a universe capable of producing carbon-based life. Life is no random accident. From the first nanosecond – against all probability- the cosmos has been so arranged as to make the emergence of life a high probability. Carter called this strange coincidence the “anthropic principle” (from the Greek word for “human being”) (Toolan, 174-175).

Intelligent Design (ID) theory is a complex story, and too long to take up in detail. What should be noted, however, is that other scientists, such as Francis Collins and Kenneth Miller, and Georgetown University theologian John Haught view the stance with suspicion. They show how ID inserts a theological claim – that God intended life and therefore made the Big Bang happen the way it did - into a scientific argument, presenting it to be a more adequate scientific explanation than Darwinian evolutionary theory. But in effect, this is a “God of the Gaps” answer. It is unacceptable scientifically and too narrow theologically (Haught, 2006:67-69; K. Miller, 126-128; Collins, 181-195).

**5. The Universe as Revelatory Experience of Numinous Presence.** Some thinkers, such as Roman Catholic priest cultural historian Thomas Berry, embrace the scientific narrative of the universe, but challenge the claim of scientific naturalism that material nature is all there is. Influenced by his knowledge of world religions and by Teilhard de Chardin's mystical sense of a vitalism permeating the universe, Berry posits that the universe has a psychic structure, present in even its simplest of structures that renders it numinous and capable of awakening us to the divine (Berry, 2006, 64; 1999b, vi-vii; Dalton, 61-73). Berry's notion of the psycho-spiritual or religious dimension of the universe is a broad one, intended to be inclusive of what many nature traditions and some world religions mean when they speak of the *spirit* or the *divine* or the *sacred* in nature (Dalton, 123-124; 185).

Berry is also critical of theistic religions, and especially Christianity. He believes that the "the transcendent, personal, monotheistic creative deity" of traditional theistic religions is no longer workable because this belief "tends to desacralize the phenomenal world," something he says that did not occur in other religions. Further the heavenly deity of the opening chapters of Genesis is a patriarchal one who was given precedence "over the earlier feminine Earth-dwelling deities" (Berry, 2006, 25). He explains that linking cosmology and Christian theology is not his primary interest.

In my writing one would find only marginally any attempt to explain the coherence of my thinking with Christian belief. What I have tried to provide is a comprehensive understanding of contemporary scientific thinking about the universe as an integral evolutionary process. My basic proposition is that the universe, in the phenomenal order, is the only self-referent mode of being. All other beings, including humans, are universe referent in their origin, in their activities and in their fulfillment. My writings are intended to deal primarily with the phenomenal world. On occasion, however, I do indicate what I see to be a more spiritual or mystic role of the universe. The universe can be seen as divine manifestation or as the

visible expression of the numinous world, or simply as expression of some ineffable mystery more available to the artist and musician than to those engaged in rational or verbal expression.

Also, I understand the individual self as seeking in its deepest desires for completion in the Great Self of the universe. The consequence for contemporary humans of being taken away from immediate experience of natural phenomena and having no adequate referent for the deeper mystery of things is a profound personal loneliness. There is only the world of mechanistic technologies (Berry, 1999b, vii).

Berry is suspicious of faith in a transcendent God because he believes it undermines earth care and concern (Berry, 2006, 25-32). So, one might ask: Is he a theist or a religious naturalist?

The answer lies perhaps in Berry's vision and his method. He writes compellingly of the ecological crisis of our times. His passion is to awaken cosmic wonder in *everyone*, hoping that the restoration of the *sacred* to the cosmos will act as a deterrent to the massive exploitation of the earth today by humans. He appeals widely across many naturalist and religious traditions to galvanize a universal ethical response to preserve the biosphere. All religions must join in this effort and focus the moral persuasiveness of their powerful teachings on eco-conversion (Berry, 2006, 57, 134). Specifically, and in a context of describing himself as a conservative Christian, Berry calls Christians to expand theological understanding and expression in the light of today's scientific knowledge: "If God is speaking to us through the universe, and if we are now seeing that the universe functions differently from what earlier Christians thought, then we must have a different way of articulating our Christian belief" (Berry&Clarke, 1991, 54; 79).

There are some tensions then in Berry's thought between his marginalization of traditional religions and also his appeal to them and between his understanding of the

universe as primary and a transcendent God as primary. At the same time, there can be no doubt about his concern for the earth and his challenge to leave old paradigms behind and shape a new one from science and from faith. We are in a new time cosmologically, Berry proclaims, and we have a “Great Work” ahead of us as “our way into the future” (Berry, 1999a).

**6. Evolutionary Theism.** Some scientists and many theologians promote still another position that embraces both the scientific explanation of the universe and the Christian understanding of God and creation. These thinkers hold that science and religion are related, not by *conflict* (irreconcilable) or *contrast* (entirely different realms), but rather by *contact* (dialogue and interaction) and even *confirmation* (science informing religion, religion supporting science). Like scientists Collins and Miller who call for a better integration of science and religion in our culture, theologian Haught argues for a layered understanding of reality, one in which scientific knowledge is accepted but also one that does not reduce all knowledge to scientific naturalism (Haught, 1995, 9-26). Basically, the Roman Catholic theological tradition is situated within this evolutionary theistic interpretation of the relation of science and religion. Despite some historical disputes (Galileo, for instance) and some which no doubt will still appear in the processes of interpretation, the dialectic between faith and reason is a healthy one in Catholic theology, and today there is a renewed and robust discussion of the relationship between our Christian faith story and our contemporary scientific understandings of cosmology, evolution, and ecology, as the next section will show, at least in part.

### C. Summary of Salient Points for Integration with the Other Stories.

- The universe that we know today had a beginning, is very old, almost unimaginably vast, and still expanding. It is dynamic, open, unfinished.
- Everything in the universe is connected and interdependent. Life emerged slowly and evolved from the simple to the more complex through a long process of natural selection, genetic drift, and adaptation.
- There are many interpretations of the scientific story of the universe when it is put in relationship with religious stories, and specifically the Christian story. These positions include: 1) denying a relationship with religion; 2) denying theism but claiming that the universe itself is religious; 3) denying or qualifying the scientific universe and evolution story because of biblical literalism; 4) positing God into the scientific story as its Intelligent Designer; 5) positing a psychic or religious character to the universe to appeal broadly to various religious traditions for eco-justice conversion; 6) affirming an evolutionary theism that asserts that the scientific story of the universe and evolution and the Christian story are compatible.
- Fundamentally, the Roman Catholic Christian story upholds a positive relationship between reason and religious faith and knowledge. Thus, it is located in position 6 as described above, which affirms both the current scientific account of the universe and evolution and the Christian faith story.

## II. THE CHRISTIAN STORY AND THE UNIVERSE STORY

*For believers, the great size and beauty of our universe reveal the wonder and artistry and the greatness of God. They see God at work in our expanding universe, in the great Milky Way galaxy with its more than a hundred billion stars, and in the more than a hundred billion other galaxies that make up our observable universe, sustaining all things, enabling creatures to break through to new levels of complexity and organization, and enfolding the whole curvature of space-time within divine creative love. This is God's Wisdom at work.*

Denis Edwards, *Jesus the Wisdom of God*, p.75

### A. A Brief Description

The heart of the Christian story is our belief that Jesus of Nazareth, a first century Jew, lived among us on this earth as one filled fully with the Holy Spirit of God, which fullness manifested itself in astounding preaching, teaching, healing, and other acts of extraordinary love in such a way that Jesus was recognized by his followers to be God among us. Equally compelling is that Jesus called others to follow him in the way he

showed them, to change their lives radically, to actualize more fully the God life already in them, and to extend it outwards to others, especially to the poor and the excluded and forgotten ones in their midst. Such a transformation of life, Jesus taught, comes about, not principally by an ethical conversion undertaken by the followers themselves but more by being seized and taken into the very heart of God who is the fullness of abiding love.

Strikingly, this story took shape quickly in its telling and effected communities of followers, many of them poor and excluded, all over the known Mediterranean world. The first telling was oral and then gradually the story was written down, first in small pieces in a variety of literary forms taken from local traditions. By the end of the first century, these texts were edited into epistles and gospels, more coherent but not completely consistent narratives of the story of Jesus the Christ: who he was, what he left his followers, and how his life as God among us continues after his suffering, death, and resurrection through the ever active and transforming Holy Spirit.

This New Testament period of the story is dense with narrative activity and characteristics. There are stories within the story: in call narratives, parables, healing accounts, controversies to make a point, sermons peppered with riddles and proverbs, and long soliloquies, especially in the Gospel of John. There is the use of core themes from the Jewish tradition: of creation from nothing or out of chaos; of the fall in the flourishing garden; of life-turning revelation on the mountain; of covenants with nature and with people; of exile, longing, waiting, purification, hoping, and the prophets' *Shuv* (*Return, O Israel, to me, your God who loves you*). There is the use of core Jewish images, such as healing and caring *Wisdom* and the revealing and liberating *Word*.

There is also the use of Greek and Roman cultural ideas and literary forms: cosmological and philosophical ideas, for example, especially in the epistles of Paul and the gospel of John. The first few generations of Spirit inspired preachers, teachers, and healers continued to shape the story as it was proclaimed in new cultures. Their telling was always to implicate the listeners into the story, to invite them to *become* the story through *metanoia*, to have their selves transformed by God's own life and love.

This story has lasted and its long history with its ongoing elaborations, corrections, and divisions is very important. Here, however, we note only a few themes of that development. First, the core story lives today in diverse forms, including Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Uniate, Anglican, and various Protestant expressions. These communities - with their differing accents in teaching, liturgy, ethical practices, and church order - exist in diverse cultures around the world and increasingly they are taking root in Africa and Asia. Secondly, all of these Christian communities, along with most other world religions and cultures, face several challenges today. These include: de-patriarchalization; denouncement of all forms of violence that linger in their teachings and practices; the development of enculturation; undertaking institutional reforms for wider participation and accountability; improved proclamation, teaching, and worship to nurture authentic Christian spirituality; and the elaboration of their relationship with other world religions.

New challenges are coming as well from the scientific account of the universe and from the ecological crisis of our time. Significantly, there are lively church, inter-church, and inter-faith discussions occurring today on how cosmic consciousness and Christian commitment relate to each other. This important and hopeful development is

generating cosmic and earth consciousness and some joint action to promote sustainable living (EJM, EJP, FCG, FORE, NCCC, RE). In our analysis, we focus first on some challenges to the Christian Story arising from cosmic consciousness and then secondly on some of the deep currents in the Christian story that carry us into the Universe story in profound and challenging ways.

## **B. Some Analysis of Cosmic Consciousness and the Christian Story**

**1. Challenges to the Christian Story.** At least five principle criticisms of the Christian story have arisen over the last several decades from some interpretations of the scientific story of the universe and from the plight of our planet earth today. They are outlined below as issues at play in today's expanding reflection on the Christian story as source for a positive and profound relationship to the Universe story.

**a. Religion as a Delusion.** Some scientists, and others, believe that religion is a delusion, and worse a worldview that fosters war, discrimination, child and woman abuse, and dependence on myths and control which deprive people from developing their own rationally and scientifically based ethical lives (Dawkins). While this position may not be of too much concern for us as reflective and committed believers, it is important to consider because it is an attitude gaining currency in Western culture and because, as we noted above, some forms of Christianity, and other religions too, respond by opposing or even denying scientific knowledge. Many Christian theologians and some scientists are engaging this challenge critically, but it is a persistent and pervasive attitude in much of Western culture today, and especially in universities (Haight, 2006, 1-31).

**b. Religious Naturalism.** A second challenge comes from religious naturalism which says that the universe, and specifically the earth, is sacred or religious in its own right. Its sacred character is not derived from a personal and creating God. This is the position of many world religions and some new nature-based forms of spirituality. At this point, it is not possible to take up an exploration of the beliefs, ethics, and ritual practices of various world religions to see why and how they hold this position, nor to evaluate them. It can be noted only that religious naturalism is substantively different from the Christian claim: that the universe is sacred because it is created by a personal, loving, intelligent, and caring God.

**c. Human-Centered Christianity.** A third challenge claims that Christianity is largely responsible for the degradation of the earth because of its biblically based, human-centered focus. Medieval historian Lynn Townsend White, Jr. made such a charge in an influential 1967 article, claiming that Christianity has contributed in a major way to our ecological crisis because it supports the biblical idea that humans have dominion over nature. Believing they are “made in God’s image” has functioned to legitimate humans as separate from nature, as superior beings meant to make endless discovery and progress at the expense of nature (White). While White’s comments are seen today by many to be overstated, they had had provoking power and so there is today a healthy discussion on how to understand the “image of God” designation and our relationship as humans with the cosmos and our biosphere, planet earth.

**d. Redemption-Centered Christianity.** A fourth challenge comes from some writers who claim that Christianity has been centered too much on redemption and not enough with creation (Berry & Clarke, Fox). Such a focus, this view claims, puts the

spotlight on our fallen rather than gracious nature and on the heavenly future rather than the earthly now. In its extreme form, the redemption focus prioritizes the spiritual realm, and not the earth, as our true home, and thus abets earth neglect. This is of course a serious challenge, if true, because of its consequences for earth neglect but also because it cuts to the core of the Christian faith as one that offers hope for deliverance and wholeness, two themes important themselves in ecological ethics.

**e. *The Distant, Dispassionate God.*** Some scientists portray God as the distant, outside, judging, omnipotent force, the One who may indeed have started it all but who is no longer involved with creation. This deist notion of God took strong footing in the Enlightenment Era, when reason took precedence over faith, when science was exerting its autonomous authority, and when the state was separating itself from the church. This notion of God, of course, is not limited to scientists. Unfortunately, many persons today have such a God image, built up in part from biblical narrative using anthropomorphic ways of talking about God and also from inadequate faith formation. One's experience and image of God is certainly at play in relating to the universe story.

These challenges and others like them are stimulating deeper reflection on the Christian story today. Strands from its richly complex tradition are being drawn forward, refined, and enlarged through engagement with the scientific account of the universe, inviting Christians to enter more deeply into the "thickness" of their story to see its connections with universe and ecological consciousness. As this dialogue continues, new images and interpretations will arise, as they have in past critical transformations of the Christian story. There is little doubt that the critical and mutually transforming

correlation between the Universe Story and the Christian Story is crucial to the future of our planet and therefore to the universe itself.

**2. Connecting to the Universe Story.** We turn now to consider briefly some themes in the Christian Story that link us profoundly to the scientific Universe Story.

**a. The Immensity and Intimacy of Our God.** The Hebrew Scriptures abound with captivating images and stories that link God both largely and intimately with creation. Far from the distant deistic notion, our God is active, present, creating, healing, and transforming. God is nurturing, sustaining, consoling, and caring for all that is. God is the unlimited lover who is full of compassion, forgiveness, and mercy. God is breath creating life, healer giving wholeness in life, spirit urging fullness of life. God is *Sophia*, active, guiding, and creating everywhere with wisdom and compassion; God is *Word*, proclaiming, promising, and transforming everywhere with courage and truth. God is faithful and the promise for all that is. God is love, spilled forth freely and continually and unconditionally. God is in relationship with all that is.

The New Testament continues this sense of God as creating, liberating, and transforming, identifying Jesus as God-with-us, the fullness of life and love in our midst, God's love spilled out again in a new creation, enfleshed on this earth. Jesus shows us a new way of apprehension, a new way of thinking, feeling, and imagining, a new way of being in love with God and all that is, and especially the poor and powerless; his way of transforming love continues in us through the ever creating Holy Spirit.

Early theological reflection galvanized this scriptural revelation into a dynamic understanding of God as three in one: three persons in intimate communion, in relation with each other and in dynamic, intimate communion with all that is. This Trinitarian

synthesis challenges the limits of our understanding, but it functions as a dynamic way of proclaiming at once both the utter transcendence and utter immanence of God. God alone is God, but God is utterly relational, and God's relational love is made manifest in the creation which itself exists relationally. Thus, for Christians, at the very heart of the mystery of God is a communion of persons, and this is the radical foundation of the mutuality of all that is. All is connected in the scientific story of the cosmos and all is connected from the very being of God who is communion (Clifford, Coyne, Edwards, Johnson, LaCugna).

**b. *The Universe as Sacrament.*** The Hebrew Scriptures proclaim the goodness of creation and also that creation belongs to God. Scripture scholar Dianne Bergant unfolds this rich tradition as it recurs in Genesis, the Prophets, Psalms, Proverbs, and Wisdom. The earth is the Lord's (Ps 24) "and no one else's ... It belongs to no other god, neither mythological nor scientific. It belongs to no human beings, neither individuals nor nations nor all of humanity as a race" (Bergant, 5) .because God created it and is present in it with fidelity, care, and love. Franciscan theologian Zachary Hayes agrees and accents as well that the psalmists see the world, not as God, but as the manifestation of the beauty and munificence of God.

In the context of religious systems which tend to divinize the cosmos, or particular things within the cosmos, the authors of the biblical texts are concerned with emphasizing that, for all the beauty and wonder of the created order, the world is not divine. Rather, its beauty points to an even richer beauty in the reality of God who is the Creator of the world, but not a part of the world (Hayes, 30).

The works of God show us God and lead to moving prayer, as in Psalm 104, a sustained song of awe and praise, which sees God in all of nature and has power even

today to speak for us: “I will sing to God as long as I live; I will sing praise to my God while I have being” (Ps 104:33).

This sacramental sense of creation extends to the New Testament. God becomes incarnate in Jesus and thereby intensifies the proclamation of the goodness of creation. Jesus is a kind of sacrament: he is of this earth, and he also points beyond to God’s fullness. Jesus is the icon of God, manifesting God anew in time and space and drawing all into ever transforming communion.

Thus, the Christian story affirms the sacred character of the universe because it belongs to God and it manifests God. The universe in its beauty, its elegance, its mystery, and its ever changing character is a kind of sacrament. It participates in the very life of God. It is in communion with the very being of God, as Aquinas says. It is itself fully, and also points beyond to God’s self as its ultimate source. It is not God and yet it gives us God. Its sacramental character is intensified in the appearance of God-among-us in Jesus, who leads us into deep communion with all who are and all that is. We too become sacraments, bearing God life and also always carrying hope for more healing and wholeness in all that is.

***c. Situating Human Persons in Nature.*** The community of persons at the source of creation and the God-manifesting character of all that is give Christians the ground from which to understand themselves as humans in nature. Human persons are an integral part of creation, made from stardust and from the outpouring love of God, like all else in the universe. They bear the universe, being made from it; they bear God’s image, being shaped by it into original goodness and love. They are individuals, but so

only by being at once in relationship, as the unfolding of their lives show. They are in communion with God and with all that is from the beginning.

Genesis proclaims that God saw that everything was good and then God continued to create and made humankind in God's own image and likeness and gave the male and female humans *dominion* over everything (Gen 1:26). There is no doubt that the dominion idea, understood as having control of creation to serve human needs exclusively, has taken deep root in Western culture. As Elizabeth Johnson notes, this attitude has come about from a *kingship* interpretation of this text where humans are seen to be at the top of a hierarchy in creation. Moving to a *stewardship* interpretation of dominion is some improvement because it generates attitudes of respect and responsibility for creation, but it also retains our separateness from the rest of creation. More fundamental, Johnson says, is the *kinship* interpretation which recognizes our radical interdependence with all that is (Johnson, 1993, 29-32).

Taking the biblical message as a whole, we find support for the kinship relationship for we are called to love and act in creation as God does who is in intimate relationship with all that is. Thus, to desecrate nature is to act against the image of God in us, not to manifest it. In biblical terms, it is to eat not from the tree of life but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. In modern terms, it is to act out the excesses of the Enlightenment Era that have promoted a wholly separate and autonomous reason and extreme individualism. Instead, we are called to manifest connection and communion in all that we do uniquely as humans. As the self-consciousness of the universe, it is we who have discovered and written its story and it is we who bear special responsibility to live in it relationally and non-violently.

**d. Integrating Incarnation, Redemption, and Resurrection.** The kinship way of being in creation emphasizes incarnation, our own from the universe and God's love and God's in concrete time and place in Jesus. Creation and Incarnation are thus radically interconnected in the Christian story and ground the goodness, truth, and beauty of all that is. At the same time, the story points to the reality of human freedom which allows humans to move away from their original goodness. We engage in destructive acts from greed, pride, envy, jealousy, self-centeredness; we engage in wars and violence against each other and against the natural world. Even though we know we never truly lose our original goodness and radical communion with God, we are always in need of finding our footing again through healing and reconciliation.

This reality of sin and our ongoing need for healing is conveyed richly in the Christian story. In the Hebrew Scriptures, God is always there to provide manna in the desert, to put flesh on dry bones, to make rivers of life flow, to create a new heart, to work miracles in the barren, to breathe life into the dead. In the New Testament, Jesus appears in the first century as the compassionate and healing God in our midst. He is proclaimed in the gospels and epistles as saviour, redeemer, and reconciler, and the transforming work of his passion, death, and resurrection continues through the Holy Spirit in us. The Redeeming mystery - grasped not narrowly as a kind of buying us back from our sinfulness, but rather expansively as rendering us and all of creation whole, as liberating us and drawing us more deeply into communion - is essential for empowering us in our own work of restoring the earth in its natural and social relations to wholeness. In contemporary theology, there are efforts to link cosmic suffering, as for instance, in

the long road of life development struggle in evolution, with the broad notion of God as our hope and promise (Haught, 2005).

Salvation (*salva*) means health or wholeness and it is linked to the mystery of Christ's resurrection, which lives on in us now, here concretely on this earth, dynamically and open-ended, through the living Spirit of God with us. It is there to offer constant hope and courage and vision and creativity. Living consciously in these linked mysteries, always open to being transformed by them, puts us directly into the heart of the salvation struggle of our times: to incarnate planetary and social justice relationally.

***e. Contemplating the Cosmic Christ and the Ever Creating Spirit.*** The scriptural focus on salvation is large and grand; it is cosmic in its reaches, as Paul preached. To the Colossians, he proclaimed that Jesus Christ is

the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creatures. In him, everything in heaven and on earth was created. ... He is before all else that is. In him everything continues in being. ... It pleased God to make absolute fullness reside in him and, by means of him, to reconcile everything in his person, both on earth and in the heavens, making peace through the blood of his cross. (Col 1:15-20).

These themes, repeated in Rom 8:19-24, 1 Cor 8:6; Eph 2:14-18; and Heb 1:2, are also linked to the Holy Spirit as the ever creating power of love, acting anew through the resurrected life of Jesus the Christ. The cosmic Christ and the ever creating Spirit themes have persisted in the Christian story in the writings of Bonaventure, Francis of Assisi, Hildegard of Bingen, and Teilhard de Chardin, among others. Fired anew from our cosmological knowledge today, many theologians are re-working these themes to emphasize the dynamic, developing character of the Christian religious experience and its openness to contemporary cosmic and evolutionary science (Clifford, Edwards, Haught, Johnson). Wider interpretations will no doubt continue to emerge.

**f. Eco-Social Justice as Prophetic Action.** The Incarnation-Salvation-Resurrection narrative of the Christian story grounds us in hope and promise. It roots our passion for justice, nurtures our gifts for reconciling, and draws us to commit with others to *The Great Work* (Berry, 1999a) of our times. The flowering of eco-social justice consciousness in the world faiths (FORE) and among Christian churches is one of the great signs of our times (Hessel & Rasmussen). Along with many Christian communities, the Roman Catholic Church has identified the critical state of our blue planet as our age's moral imperative. John Paul II delivered a Papal Message in 1990, entitled *The Ecological Crisis: A Common Responsibility* (John Paul II). The United States Roman Catholic Bishops issued a national Pastoral Statement in 1991, called *Renewing the Earth* (USCCB). The Canadian Roman Catholic Bishops sent a Pastoral Letter in 2003, titled "*You Love All that Exists ... All Things Are Yours, God, Lover of Life ...*" *On the Christian Ecological Imperative* (CCCB).

The Papal Message calls for joint actions at the international level and asks that the right to a safe environment be added to the United Nations Charter of Human Rights. The U. S. Bishops show the links between ecological devastation and human injustice, especially amongst the poor and the powerless. They call for the development of sustainable economic policies that respect the natural systems and also take into account "hundreds of millions of poor families who live at the edge of survival." (USCCB, I, B). After describing some specific forms of ecological disasters in Canada, the Canadian Bishops set out the lines of a religious response to the crisis, calling all to embrace eco-justice practices in a three-fold inter-related way: 1) *contemplatively*, by deepening appreciation and wonder for all that is; 2) *ascetically*, by exercising care with

goods and by fasting from polluting and over consumption; 3) *prophetically*, through community based action and support for national and international eco-justice analysts and activists “who have begun to show the way forward” (CCCB, par 17).

All these statements recognize the urgent need for all to undergo an intellectual and moral conversion that links social and ecological justice. “The cry of the earth and the cry of the poor are one,” as the Canadian Bishops put it (CCCB, par 17) and as authors such as Brazilian Ivone Gebara describe dramatically (Gebara). Such a conversion involves new knowledge, new attitudes, and new actions, nine of which are set forth by the US Bishops (USCCB, V, B). Thus, to engage in *The Great Work* today as Christians is to co-create with others, to act from our profound communion with God and with all that is, to renew the face of the earth. It is to unite the mystical, the ascetical, and the prophetic, hallmarks of an authentic Christian spirituality.

There are many other themes in the Christian Story that link to the universe story, including the theme of ecstatic love where consciousness disappears into the well of pure love and communion; the theme of “seeing” God in the darkness, in pain, suffering, and the enigmas of human and cosmic experience; the theme of co-creation where doing art, music, science, politics, economics, social relations, teaching, healing, and many other human activities puts something truly new into the universe. There is too the theme of radical acts of courage and of forgiveness where human limitations give way and birth new vision and hope that empowers others. Some of these and others will no doubt emerge in reflection and discussion. .

### **C. Summary of Salient Points for Integration with the Other Stories.**

- The heart of the Christian story is our belief that Jesus of Nazareth lived among us on this earth as one filled with the Holy Spirit of God, which fullness

manifested itself in astounding preaching, teaching, healing, and other acts of extraordinary love in such a way that Jesus was recognized by his followers to be God among us.

- Equally compelling is the fact that Jesus called others to follow him in the way he showed them, to change their lives radically, to actualize more fully the God life already in them, and to extend it outwards to others, especially to the poor and the excluded and forgotten ones in their midst. Such a transformation of life, Jesus taught, comes about, not principally by an ethical conversion undertaken by the followers themselves but more by being seized and taken into the very heart of God who is the fullness of forever-there love.
- The Christian story also proclaims that this dynamic of transforming discipleship continues today through the ongoing communing and inspiring love of God in Jesus Christ and through the Holy Spirit.
- While there are many challenges today to certain interpretations of the Christian Story arising from our new cosmic and evolutionary scientific consciousness, the Christian story has rich enduring themes to connect us profoundly to the science story of the universe and to the ecological challenges of our times. These include:
  - the at-once immanence and transcendence of God;
  - creation as the outpouring of relational love;
  - the sacramental character of the universe;
  - humans as an integral part of the universe with special responsibilities for its care;
  - the linked understanding of Creation, Redemption, Resurrection;
  - the cosmic theme in scripture and the tradition;
  - social eco justice as prophetic action, as our way to enter into the *Great Work* of our times.
- Just as it has in the past at critical times in the development of culture, the Christian Story will expand in its interpretations, as it continues today to engage the science story of the universe and the ecological issues of the earth. Roman Catholics, along with many other Christian communities, believe that these two stories correlate and mutually enhance each other.

### III. THE EARTH CHARTER AND THE CHRISTIAN STORY

*Earth's pain is becoming humanity's pain. We have consistently ignored the dark side of development and we continue to do so. Earth, while it is our home, and home to all living creatures, has been used ruthlessly and mercilessly and unsustainably. The very existence of life on Earth is at stake. We must reverse this trend if life on Earth as we have known it for millennia is to continue. ... We need the inner strength to be able to say to ourselves and to the world, "My life is my message." If we cannot do this, the Earth Charter will fail. Ultimately, Earth's sustainability is based on deep spiritual and religious experience. Earth is sacred and spiritual and needs to be treated as such. ... We need to*

*weave the Earth Charter around our own living traditions, our values, and our concepts of sacredness and spirituality.*

Kamia Chowdhry, *The Earth Charter in Action*, 180-181.

## **A. A Brief Description**

Reflecting on the wonders of the Universe and Christian stories leads us naturally to the Earth Story, the tale of our small but unique neighborhood in the cosmos, the place where there is life and where we see and create such beauty and also such horror. We considered briefly earlier in this paper the cosmic origins of our planet. To enhance that brief description and to have a better understanding, the reader might find three recent books informative and enjoyable: Bill Bryson's, *A Short History of Nearly Everything*; Dava Sobel's, *The Planets*; and E. O. Wilson's, *The Creation: An Appeal to Save Life on Earth*. Here we focus on the 2000 Earth Charter as a universal vision to renew the face of the earth at this time of planetary peril.

The Earth Charter has its origins in the United Nations' *World Commission on Environment and Development* (1987) which addressed environmental issues and sustainable development. It called for a universal declaration and new norms concerning sustainable development. The draft UN Earth Charter that followed was presented at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, but it was not accepted. In 1994, two well known international leaders, Maurice Strong of Canada and Mikhail Gorbachev of Russia, took up the work together as citizens, organizing research and international consultations. They formed the *Earth Charter Commission* (ECC) in 1997 which continued cross-cultural international consultation at the grassroots and with experts. In March, 2000, the ECC reached consensus on the Earth Charter at a meeting held at the UNESCO Headquarters in Paris and the following June the document was publicly launched at The Hague. It is now promoted by the *Earth Charter Initiative* (ECI).

The ECI is an “extraordinarily diverse, global network of people, organizations, and institutions.” It is a “broad-based, voluntary, civil society effort, but participants include leading international institutions, national government agencies, university associations, NGO’s, cities, faith groups, and many well-known leaders in sustainable development.” Its mission is: “To establish a sound ethical foundation for the emerging global society and to help build a sustainable world based on respect for nature, diversity, universal human rights, economic justice, and a culture of peace.” Its long term goal is “the universal adoption and implementation of the Earth Charter as a statement of common values and principles for a sustainable future.” The ECI seeks adoption of the Earth Charter by individuals and groups, and in particular it is working for adoption by the United Nations (ECI, 2006a), a goal strongly supported by the Charter Commissioners (Gorbachev, 10; Strong, 12).

The Earth Charter itself has been described as follows:

The Earth Charter is a declaration of fundamental principles for building a just, sustainable, and peaceful global society in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It seeks to inspire in all peoples a new sense of global interdependence and shared responsibility for the well-being of the human family and the larger living world. It is an expression of hope and a call to help create a global partnership at a critical juncture in history.

The Earth Charter’s inclusive ethical vision recognizes that environmental protection, human rights, equitable human development, and peace are interdependent and indivisible. It provides a new framework for thinking about and addressing these issues. The result is a fresh, broad conception of what constitutes a sustainable community and sustainable development (ECI, 2006b)

Readers are invited to read Earth Charter to appreciate its stirring *Preamble*, its sixteen interdependent *Principles*, and its challenging conclusion, *The Way Forward* (ECI, 2000). Since the Earth Charter itself is so clear and also since it has already been a

subject of study and reflection in the Monroe IHM congregation (SSIHM, [*The Earth Charter*]), our comments in the next section will be brief.

## **B. Some Analysis of the Christian Story and the Earth Charter**

**1. *Its Organic and Interrelated Character.*** The Earth Charter is a universal ethical statement complementary to two other global declarations: the 1945 *Charter of the United Nations* and the 1948 *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. It is new in that it situates the rights of nations and human beings within the much broader horizon of ecological integrity by affirming the interdependent nature of all human relations with the earth. Also, it states strongly that humans must take up their responsibility to address our planetary problems and to reverse course. The vision proposed represents a new post-Enlightenment paradigm that integrates care for human rights with care for the biosphere. The movement away from excessive individualism and toward the common good, understood integrally, is truly new in international thinking. In so doing, the Earth Charter relates very well with the Christian story, in particular in its call to integrate eco and social justice as a moral imperative.

**2. *Its Spiritual Character.*** The Earth Charter is not a religious document, but it is notable for affirming the importance of religious traditions and values in shaping the way forward. It proclaims: “The protection of the Earth’s vitality, diversity, and beauty is a sacred trust.” It calls on all to “live with reverence for the mystery of being, gratitude for the gift of life, and humility regarding the human place in nature.” It declares the need for radical change in “our values, institutions, and ways of living” (Preamble). It advocates for the poor, the ignored, the vulnerable, the ignorant and those suffering from discrimination and violence (Principles 9-12). It recognizes the importance of the

plurality of religions and calls on all of them “to offer creative leadership” (Conclusion). It is easy to see its relationship with the Christian story which sees these values as the very core of its meaning from our communion with God

Stephen Rockefeller, an Earth Charter commissioner, sees the Earth Charter as “part of a quest for a spirituality and ethics adequate to the challenge of building a planetary civilization” that will give global consciousness its spiritual depth, its soul. The idea, he says, is not to create a new religion but to call all religions to “a planetary consciousness that involves awareness of global interdependence, acceptance of religious diversity, and commitment to shared values and interreligious cooperation (Rockefeller, 103). Again, the Christian story supports these values in its distinctive way which is to bear witness to God’s presence, care, and love on and in this earth.

**3. *Its Challenge at the Level of Practice.*** The Earth Charter, while not yet accepted by the members of the United Nations, is becoming better known internationally among grassroots organizations, religious coalitions, NGO’s, and eco-social justice groups (Earth Charter USA). Kamia Chowdhry, as cited above, speaks challengingly from her Hindu religious tradition when she calls for radical individual change. She says we need to be able to say, “My life is my message” and we “need to weave the Earth Charter around our own living traditions, our values, and our concepts of sacredness and spirituality.” While personal conversion is already a significant challenge, especially for the big consumers of the world, there is an even deeper test at the institutional level. The Earth Charter calls for the reform of institutions in every field of human endeavor - the arts, sciences, educational, political, economic, social, religious. This we know will be very difficult at the concrete level since it means moving

from competitive to collaborative relationships where the partners are not equal. Again, the Christian story has rich resources to support these challenges in its social justice and common good traditions, and as we have seen above there are already efforts to enhance these teachings by connection with the ecological imperative. Much remains to be undertaken, though, to become a truly ecologically reformed church. Ecumenical social ethics theologian Dieter Hessel lays out eight challenging steps, ranging from acquiring new knowledge and attitudes to engaging in new actions, which give visibility to Christian ecological integrity (Hessel).

### **C. Summary of Salient Points for Integration with the Other Stories**

- The Earth Charter is a declaration of fundamental principles for building a just, sustainable, and peaceful global society in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It seeks to inspire in all peoples a new sense of global interdependence and shared responsibility for the well-being of the human family and the larger living world.
- The Earth Charter's inclusive ethical vision recognizes that environmental protection, human rights, equitable human development, and peace are interdependent and indivisible.
- The Earth Charter envisions a post-Enlightenment paradigm where earth care and human relationships are integrated and where the human community proceeds in collaborative and participative ways, rather than competitive ones, to build up the culture of tolerance, nonviolence, and peace through right relationships.
- The Earth Charter calls for radical change in values. It advocates for the poor, the ignored, the vulnerable, the ignorant and those suffering from discrimination and violence.
- The Earth Charter recognizes the importance of the plurality of religions and calls on all of them to promote planetary consciousness and integrated eco-social justice in their own distinctive ways.
- All of these principles and values of this universal natural ethic are upheld, if not made central, in the Christian story. Distinctive from some other religious traditions, however, the Christian story grounds its ethical practice in a specific Trinitarian theistic belief where God is the source of our goodness and moral commitment.

## IV. THE IHM STORY AND THE OTHER THREE STORIES

*We believe that everything before us brought us to this moment and we claim our future directions within the richness of our tradition. Impelled by the growing realization that we are interconnected with the whole web of life, and that the escalation of violence, increasing global poverty, and the exploitation of the earth threaten all of creation, we renew our passion to live the liberating mission of Jesus in the spirit of humility, simplicity and zeal. We choose to en flesh this call by working with others to build a culture of peace and right relationship among ourselves, with the Church, and with the whole earth community.*

IHM Sisters, Monroe, MI, *Chapter 2000 Directions*, p. 2.

### A. A Brief Description

The Monroe IHM story is a particular expression of the Roman Catholic Christian story, one that arose from the crossing of two lives, Redemptorist Priest Louis Florent Gillet and Oblate Sister of Providence Marie Therese Maxis Duchemin. Each had a passion to live their calls to discipleship in dedicated religious life. Gillet, the zealous missionary, invited Maxis Duchemin, the dedicated teacher, to join him in Monroe Michigan to begin, with another Oblate Sister and a young woman from a parish north of Detroit, the religious institute to be devoted to the Christian education of girls and young women. Within two months of its founding on November 10, 1845, a small school was established on the banks of the River Raisin. Thus, religious instruction and faith-formation, the urgent pastoral need that had inspired the founding of the Congregation, took root very early as integral to its mission.

The long history of this Congregation is recorded elsewhere (Kelly; SSIHM, 1989, 1997; Maher, 2000), although much of its recent history has not yet been published. Its 1989 Constitutions and declarations of its recent general assemblies and chapters, from 1972 to present, however, are readily available (SSIHM). The reader is encouraged as well to review the challenging 2003 statement, "IHM Identity: Themes from our

Congregational Word,” by Amata Miller, IHM (Miller). We shall describe only briefly some of the currents running through the IHM story to identify points of connection with the other stories.

The IHM story is of course a primary one for us in the sense that it has drawn us together and given us our way of living our Christian discipleship together. This way is described clearly and compellingly in our 1989 Constitutions, the product of post Vatican II renewal and a long congregational process. The first five chapters situate us clearly as an apostolic congregation committed: to Jesus Christ and his redeeming mission, specifically through religious vows; to loving and responsible community life; to regular personal and liturgical prayer; and to special regard for Mary as the mother of Jesus, a woman of faith and a model of the integration of contemplation and action. Chapter Six emphasizes the specific Alphonsian spiritual tradition that marks the Congregation through its founders and Chapters Seven and Eight describe the nature of our participatory government.

Like the Christian story, the IHM story is a “thick” one, developing as it did through difficulties and struggles that left their marks. In its early years, the story includes the early departure of Gillet from Monroe and the “separation” which sent Maxis into exile. The early years also manifest the effects of a tense relationship with the church; of racism; of an overly ascetical interpretation of the Alphonsian spiritual tradition; and of male control during the era of Edward Joos, a Belgian diocesan priest marked, like many others of his time, by the rigors of a Jansenistic spirituality.

Nevertheless, these struggles produced wonderful fruits: Constitutions in the Redemptorist tradition written by Gillet, with Maxis persisting in fidelity to them; an

increase in members in Monroe; two other IHM congregations in Pennsylvania; stability in the cultivation of community life; a sustained focus on the ministry of education, and especially for women through IHM sponsored high schools and Marygrove College; superb and far reaching leadership by so many members of the Congregation; an early and sustained dedication to social justice and the common good; and a commitment to the ongoing education of the members for theologically well grounded spirituality and for leadership readiness in ministry through the Sister Formation movement and other forms of continuing education.

The IHM story developed dramatically beginning in the early 1960's, a period of huge social change through world wide liberation movements, and of considerable ecclesial change coming from the Second Vatican Council. The IHM's engaged in the renewal of religious life, putting a special focus on deepening both the contemplative and active dimensions of their lives through ongoing theological education and special retreat experiences and through the extension of their ministries to respond to new needs. They widened their understanding of the Redemptorist tradition, extending it under the influences of the broader spirit of Alphonsus, the liturgical renewal's larger understanding of the Paschal Mystery, and liberation theologies. They reformulated their Constitutions, accenting the scriptural foundations of a broadened Alphonsian rooted spirituality. They changed their government structures, focusing on personal responsibility and participation to further corporate life and service. They welcomed persons wishing to relate to the Congregation more formally as Associates to extend together the IHM charism in life and ministry. They also deepened the resources of women trained in religious education, scripture, and theology to help with the task of

advancing the understanding and practice of Vatican II. They committed to a six year program of continuing their own education in theology in the light of some new contextual challenges for the church: - feminism, ecology, world religions, authority - and they extended these resources to other religious and lay communities.

The IHM's honed in on Vatican II's renewed ecclesiology and its call to commit to justice as a constitutive dimension of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. They extended their ministries to include engagement in systemic analysis and advocacy for the poor, and also to serve them directly. They exercised wider leadership by assisting other religious communities with justice education and by advocacy work at the national and state level through such agencies as *Network* and *Groundwork*. They engaged racism through reconnection with the Baltimore Oblate Sisters of Providence, through special collaborative ministry in Haiti with the Immaculata and Scranton IHM Congregations, and through renewed commitment to the city of Detroit.

In their 1972 Assembly, informed by the justice vision of Vatican II, the IHM's expressed again their long standing commitment to social justice in Affirmation 10, a prophetic orientation that has permeated all their recent assemblies and chapters (Miller, 10-12; SSIHM, 2006, 2000). In 1987, care for the human community was enjoined to the concern for "the interdependence and unity of all creation as central to an emerging world view" (SSIHM, 1987) and more recently, the comprehensive *Underlying Direction* of Chapter 2000, cited above, voiced this expanded understanding eloquently and challengingly. Chapter 2000 also approved the *Monroe Campus Long Range Master Plan Integrating Idea* (SSIHM, 2000) which led to the renovation of the Monroe Motherhouse in accord with the principles of sustainable development.

Thus, the originating commitment to faith formation and religious instruction, elaborated over time into a firm and constant commitment to social justice to be expressed in all forms of ministry, has been stretched again today, by taking into account new knowledge arising from science on the universe and evolution and on the current state of our planet. The IHM's have pledged themselves to "renew our passion to live the liberating mission of Jesus in the spirit of humility, simplicity, and zeal" and to work with others "to build a culture of peace and right relationship among ourselves, with the church, and with the whole earth community" (SSIHM, 2000). Still, as the specific directional statements of Chapters 2000 and 2006 show, much remains to be discerned and to be worked out in the current chapter of the IHM story. Like the earth itself, the IHM's are at a crossroads, a time again of difficulties and struggles, a time for hope and trust and focus in living the liberating mission of Jesus today.

## **B. Some Analysis of the IHM Story in Relation with the Other Stories.**

### ***1. Radical Openness to the Science Story of the Universe and the Earth***

**Charter.** The IHM story is open to the Universe and Earth stories because it is situated radically within the Roman Catholic Christian story which respects both the science story of the universe and the ethical vision of the Earth Charter. Further, since Vatican II, the IHM story has undertaken a broader and deeper revision of its Alphonsonian tradition so that its liberating mission, grounded in the experience of the active Triune God, is now challenged to integrate human care and earth care as never before.

***2. Ongoing Education of Ourselves and Others.*** As a persistent thread in the IHM story, learning is undertaken always to broaden the base of an integrated contemplative and active spirituality and to equip its members for ministry.

Understanding each of these four stories more profoundly, and in particular how social and ecological justice are linked, is basic to how we continue to live the IHM story faithfully today.

**3. Commitment to Sustainable Living.** To commit to communitarian vowed religious life is by its nature to commit to a sustainable way of life. All in the community live mutually in interdependence through relationship with God who transforms our desires and fills our hearts. All the gifts in the members and all property and finances are held in common. All the members are mutually responsible for each other and for the common good, as it continues to be elaborated by the needs of the times. In our 2006 Chapter Directions, we challenged ourselves to a renewed understanding of our vowed life, and in particular regarding our “personal lifestyles, community living, ministerial choices, Congregational financial decisions and corporate commitments” to “assist us in building a culture of sustainability.”

From the point of view of our Monroe Campus actions over the last decade, there can be little doubt concerning our commitment to sustainable development in a larger sense, risking as we have our ability to sustain ourselves as a Congregation in the near future. Our Chapter 2006 Directions show that we are aware of an ongoing need to embrace the consequences of a commitment to sustainable living more profoundly, and in particular the integration of ecological and social justice that is in the Monroe Campus Integrating Idea (SSIHM, 2000b). We are in need yet of engaging the 2000 and 2006 Directions concretely and of nurturing, as Miller put it in 2003 “...a spirituality which links this value of sustainability with that of Gospel social justice, in the knowledge that we cannot have a sustainable world without a socially just world, and we cannot have a

world of right relationships without sustainability. In its statement of the Underlying Direction of its actions, Chapter 2000 acknowledged that linkage and tied it to our foundations” (Miller, 11)

**4. Partnering with Others in Mission.** The IHM story, especially in its development over the last several decades, has emphasized enhanced relationships with others to extend its charism, especially in ministry. There are IHM Associates, spiritual and professional relationships in ministry, joint efforts with the laity and with other religious congregations in sponsored works and in the cultivation of adult spiritual growth and development, and hospitality for those in need at the IHM Health Care Center in Monroe. Understanding and communicating the IHM vision and mission today in all these relationships continues to be both a challenge and an opportunity.

**5. IHM Impact on the Cosmos.** The impact of the gifts of the participants in the IHM story, released freely now and over the last 162 years on this earth, is immense. If a butterfly flapping its wings in Asia affects us here in North America, consider the influence of the web of life and death energies of the following: the 501 living IHM sisters of today and the 1312 who have died; the 807 who served for awhile as postulants, the 338 who served for awhile as novices, the 555 who served for awhile as professed members; the 119 living Associates, the 25 who have died; the 44 who served for awhile as associates (SSIHM Archives); and the countless persons who have helped us and whom we have helped. If the science and the Christian stories are right, these energies are still with us, helping us to take up *The Great Work* of today and find our *Way into the Future*.

### C. Summary of Salient Points for Integration with the Other Stories.

- The IHM story is open to the science story of the universe and to the principles of the Earth charter because it is situated radically within the Roman Catholic Christian story. The Roman Catholic tradition honors the relationship between reason and faith and believes that the Universe story and the Christian story mutually enhance each other.
- Central to IHM identity is “the love of Jesus Christ” which “unites us in community and impels us to proclaim the good news of salvation” (*Constitutions*, 1). Today commitment to this liberating mission of Jesus Christ entails deepening our contemplative and active spirituality and integrating social and eco-justice into all our practices in personal and communal living and in our ministries.
- The IHM story shows a commitment to the continuing education of its members to deepen their personal and spiritual integration and to equip them for ministry. Today, there is need for education on the science and evolutionary story, on a deeper and renewed understanding of the Christian story, and on the social and ecological challenges of the earth story, as expressed both in the ethics of the Christian story and of the Earth Charter. The IHM story shows commitment as well to work in partnership with others to extend understanding and changed practice.
- By reason of their vowed communal religious life, the IHM sisters are committed to gospel informed sustainable living. They are also committed to sustainable development in the broader sense as exemplified in the Monroe Campus decisions. They have also committed themselves to undertake communal reflection and action on the implications of such decisions.
- The IHM story is at a crossroads, a time again of some difficulties and struggles and also of hope and commitment, as it stretches forth from the spirit of its challenging *Underlying Direction of Chapter 2000*.

### CONCLUSION

The reader is invited to recall that we live in these four stories in an all-at-once way and that they are equally important to us, as context and life shaping narratives. In a very real sense, we can place ourselves in any one of these stories and walk a path from it to the other three, carrying the connections cumulatively along the way. This paper has identified several of these linking themes:

- **Communion:** the boundless relational love of God poured out in creation and in the Incarnation, infusing all that is and rendering it sacramental; the ongoing love of God given to us anew in Jesus the Christ and the Holy Spirit to transform us and to direct us in our mission of social and eco justice today.
- **Connection:** the interconnectedness and interdependence of all that is in the ongoing cycles of expansion and contraction, of birth and death, in the universe and earth stories and in the Christian and IHM stories.
- **Commitment:** the urgency of conversion to sustainable living at personal and institutional levels as described in the Earth Charter, the Christian story, and the IHM story, with their commitments to the integrity of God's creation.
- **Collaboration:** the call for new partnerships at every level and in every country to promote social and ecological integrity, as called for by the Earth Charter, interfaith and Christian ecumenical coalitions, the North American Roman Catholic bishops, and recent IHM Chapters.

From another point of view, it is important to start with the IHM story, the one most immediate to us because we are in it deliberately, by call and by choice, as our way to live our Christian discipleship together on planet earth at this time in its history. The IHM story has shown itself to be sturdy and adaptive, and especially in times of difficulty. Its unifying traditions are described well in the 1989 *Constitutions* and its commitment, especially from Vatican II to the present, to extend the meaning of its central theme – the redeeming mission of Jesus – to include social, ecological, and cosmological justice consciousness is very clear.

The *Underlying Direction of Chapter 2000* claims these traditions to be at play in embracing our challenges today.

*We believe that everything before us brought us to this moment and we claim our future directions within the richness of our tradition. Impelled by the growing realization that we are interconnected with the whole web of life, and that the escalation of violence, increasing global poverty, and the exploitation of the earth threaten all of creation, we renew our passion to live the liberating mission of Jesus in the spirit of humility, simplicity and zeal. We choose to en flesh this call by working with others to build a culture of peace and right relationship among ourselves, with the Church, and with the whole earth community.*

To read this text anew and to grasp it more profoundly, in the light of how the four stories are linked as discussed in this paper and in our reflections together, is very important at this time in our history. To avoid the stories running parallel to each other, with one or another seeming to take over or marginalize the others, their linkage needs to be evident in our language, our prayer, and our actions together. We need to connect more deeply as IHM's, from our profound traditions and from our new knowledge about the universe and the social and ecological conditions of our planet. We need to bring an integrated contemplative and prophetic Christian spirituality to the conversation as we join with others in the *Great Work*, our way into the future. Such a way of being together is our act of faith, hope and love in God's promise; it is our way of bearing witness to God's presence in our midst.

## SOME IHM POETRY ON NATURE

### GOD COMES

God comes most often  
 without fanfare or splendour  
 into our lives  
 a simple imperceptible coming  
 like sunsets  
 cast in quiet shades of abalone  
 on the jagged frozen shores  
 of our hidden selves.

Helen Oprysek (1930-2005) *God is our Light and Salvation*, p.5.

### RECOMMITMENT

The dogwood tree  
 outside the College Chapel  
 has flowered again.

Everywhere  
 its flame-tipped petals  
 have fallen and scattered like stars

in the chinks of weathered sidewalk,  
 over the lawn,

on the road to the library  
 where tires press them into poems  
 on the pages of summer.

The dogwood tree has flowered  
 and showered its gift  
 in clouds of bright abandon.

It does not know circumspection  
 thrift, delay.

The great white dogwood bloom  
 stirs petals in my mind.

I open all my windows  
 to give the Spirit room.

Eleanor Fitzgibbons, IHM (1909-2004), *At Creation's Open Door*, p. 39.

## GOD IN THE WIND

O God, treat me as you do the  
 darkened sky.  
 Burst me into brilliant light.  
 Clouds hanging glumly are mine  
 waiting your quickening touch.  
 Your slightest healing breath  
 can sweep out  
 decades-old dust and debris.  
 Let your brisk zephyr  
 whirl joy, love and fresh hope  
 across my sodden fields.  
 Blue and gold my sky.

Trudy Baltes, IHM (1922-2005) *Reeds of Singing Fire*, p. 47.

## EAST WINDOW

A window on the dark is window still,  
 And mine is wide to gather all the night  
 Black with eclipse that shutters dark on light,  
 Tense with a song unsung on rim of sill,  
 In hooded radiance, poised for dawn to spill  
 The gleam of canticles across my fright.  
 Now hope remains through dearth of song and sight,  
 But what if dark should be His always will?

Through wring and wrack I yield to Your desire  
 Inflowing God whose path I cannot trace.  
 As steady current quickens tensile wire  
 Invade me through this midnight window space.

Possess me as the banked up hearth the fire  
 And love me as Your dark night is light's embrace.

Rena Geary, IHM (1918-1976), *Reeds of Singing Fire*, p. 49.

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