

Adult Catechesis for Creation Spirituality

by Fatima Lee

St. Gabriel's Passionist Parish in Toronto, Canada, is an environmental church, or, as Father Thomas Berry would say, "an ecologically sensitive" church. This essay tells the story of why it became "green" and how it attempts to engage the parish community in a journey towards an ecological conversion through catechesis.

St. Gabriel's was not always "green." In 2000, while confronting the mounting costs of heating, maintenance, and repair of the original building, the leadership of the Passionist community in Toronto made a bold move. With the support of the parish community, they proposed to build a "green" church, trying to integrate into its design and construction a mutually enhancing human-earth relationship that Fr. Berry advocated. Completed in 2006, it became the first church in Canada to receive the Gold certification from the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) Green Building Rating System.

Father Berry, a Passionist and an influential pioneer in the field of ecology and spirituality, was deeply concerned about the worsening ecological reality among industrial nations. He attributed the wanton disregard of the health of the planet to "an anthropocentric exaltation of the human"¹ that allowed humans to plunder earth for their own advantage. In the intervening years, many other authors picked up and developed this theme. The affirmation of the Catholic Church came most strongly in the 2015 encyclical of Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*. For Francis, the pollution of soil, water, and air resulted in the loss of species and biodiversity. He insisted that we can hear loudly *the cry of the earth*. Climate change, which most scientists see as anthropogenic, affects the planet's inhabitants unevenly. The most vulnerable are the ones who bear the brunt of its effects and are the least able to protect themselves. *The cry of the poor* prods our conscience.² As Christians, our role is to protect the earth, our common home, and our vulnerable brothers and sisters who are most affected by the ill health of the planet.

With the completion of the new church in 2006, it took little time before the St. Gabriel's community realized that building a "green" church can only be a first step. The real challenge is how to help the community to move away

1 Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way to the Future* (New York: Bell Tower, 1999), 104.

2 Francis, *Laudato Si'*: On Care for our Common Home (2015), no. 48, 49, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html

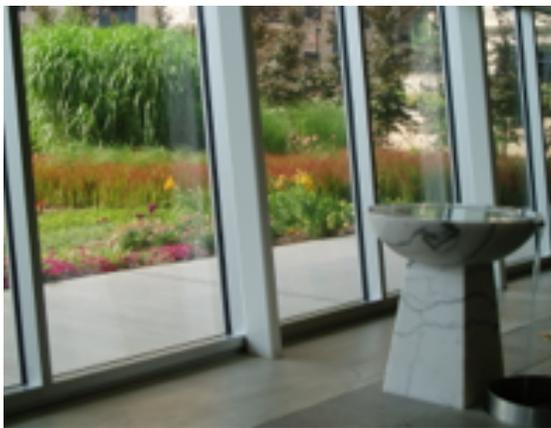
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from the all-too-familiar lens of anthropocentrism to the *ecological conversion* that Pope Francis speaks about: *a change of heart* is needed. (LS, no. 217, 218)

From Building to Heart

For the past twelve years, one of the important goals of our pastoral ministry at St. Gabriel's has been to explore ways and means to facilitate this "change of heart" of the community, especially through catechesis. This change involves a reexamination of how we interpret a central facet of our Christian faith. Since Anselm of Canterbury (eleventh century), the theological tradition of the West had been increasingly focused on *human* redemption. Sin is seen as humans damaging their relationship with God and their fellow humans. With a more contemporary understanding of sin and its effects, we can now see sin as the failure to love, resulting in violence, greed, racism, and other injustices that may become solidified in socioeconomic structures. These sins cause harm to all species. Catechesis for creation spirituality involves engaging each other "in conversation about a central Christian belief in God who saves and in how this belief affects life and practice at our crucial ecological juncture."³

One of the best instruments of catechesis is the church building itself. Father Paul Cusack, CP, the long-time pastor of St. Gabriel's (who retired in 2013) described the goal in the building of the church this way: "Our primary



motivation was to establish a link between the sacredness of the gathered community of Faith and the sacredness of Earth."⁴ Hence, the entire south wall of the worship space is clear glass open into a lush garden. This extends the sacred space of the worship area into the sacred space of the world beyond. Thus, when the community gathers to worship, it does so within the greater context of creation.

The remaining three walls of the church are of concrete. They serve as a canvas for the constantly changing dynamic play of natural light filtered through the coloured glass panels of the perimeter skylight of the worship space. As the sun traverses the sky above, the display of light invites the congregation to contemplate and marvel at the wonder of God's creation. This is how Roberto Chiotti, the architect of the church, puts it:

"Seasonal influences on the sun's intensity and inclination, together with the daily diversity of weather conditions ensure that no two masses will experience an identical liturgical environment."⁵ Finally, the entire building process from design through construction along with the choice of furnishings was carefully researched to mitigate the impact of resource consumption and carbon dioxide emissions.

Eco-Sabbath, Courses, Forums

The Eco-Sabbath, which takes place every first Sunday of the month, is a tradition begun in the mid-1990s by Father Stephen Dunn, CP,



3 Elizabeth Johnson, *Creation and the Cross: The Mercy of God for a Planet in Peril* (New York: Orbis, 2018), xvii.

4 <http://stgabrielsparish.ca/who-we-are/green-church/>

5 Roberto Chiotti, in <http://stgabrielsparish.ca/who-we-are/green-church/engineering/>. Chiotti, the architect, discusses in two essays the theology and design behind the building of the new church, which can be found on the parish website. See also <http://stgabrielsparish.ca/who-we-are/green-church/green-church-theology/>

and Anne Lonergan at the former Passionist Retreat Centre in Port Burwell, Ontario. (It was also there that Fr. Thomas Berry held summer symposiums on ecology and spirituality for nearly two decades beginning in 1979.) Since Fr. Dunn's retirement from teaching at St. Michael's College in 2002, Professor Dennis O'Hara, a member of the Faculty of Theology at St. Michael College and the current Director of the Elliot Allen Institute, has been directing the Eco-Sabbath.

During each Eco-Sabbath, the lectionary readings of the Sunday are read through the lens of eco-theology and eco-justice. This is often presented in a multimedia format. Those gathered are invited to look critically at specific issues happening in the world and are challenged as to how they can respond. Such informal dialogues nudge the participants to a transformation away from an anthropocentric worldview to one that is creation centered. O'Hara likens what happens at these gatherings to sowing seeds. He describes the changes effected by the Eco-Sabbaths as being like twigs on the river; if enough gather and accumulate, the river will eventually change course. Other attempts have been made to change hearts. A course on *The Wisdom of Thomas Berry*, given by Fr. Dunn in 2010, aimed at deepening parishioners' understanding of Berry. There was also a study group that focused on *Thomas Berry and the New Cosmology*.



Two weeks after the issuing of *Laudato Si'*, an Open Forum on the encyclical was organized at St. Gabriel's and attended by over 200 participants from all over the city of Toronto and beyond. The excitement was palpable. The signs of the times they had long perceived and had been struggling with for the past few decades have moved from fringe to being officially recognized by the official Church. The forum was followed by an in-depth six-session study on the encyclical led by Prof. O'Hara in the fall of 2015.

Effecting Changes in Lifestyles and Beyond

The pastoral team also decided to catechize through challenging our own lifestyles. During Lent of 2013, *Lent 4.5*, an innovative program put together by the Passionist Earth and Spirit Center in Louisville, Kentucky, was introduced to the parish. The traditional practices of Lent took on a contemporary significance as each person was encouraged to reflect on how his/her lifestyle (e.g., food, consumption, use of water, energy, mode of transportation) impacted creation. In the traditional Lenten spirit of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving, we asked ourselves: Can we live more simply so that others can simply live?

Another attempt at changing lifestyles came in the form of the "Awakening the Dreamer" symposiums. Participants were presented with images of environmental degradation and were asked to reflect on the unexamined assumptions at work (excessive consumption, the insatiable desire of "things," etc.). Most importantly, participants were asked to ponder what we might do now, individually and cooperatively, to move the world in a new direction.

In the Garden through Labour of Our Own Hands

The most recent attempt at catechesis for creation spirituality is a garden ministry that invites volunteers to revitalize the gardens of the church using organic horticultural principles. It is hoped that through the labour of their hands, the participants might recreate the garden space to reflect a church community that recognizes its interdependence with the larger earth community and its obligation to care for our common home.

Conclusion

We are trying to assist the faith community at St. Gabriel's in their ecological conversion. The care for our common home is not an appendix to our faith, but is at the center of the living of it. Humans are part of God's creation, which testifies to the magnificence and grandeur of the divine.