

‘Marthas’ Garden’

An Experience in Integral Ecology

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One of the four priorities arising from the 2018 General Assembly of the CRC is “Promote bold initiatives in favour of an integral ecology and an economy of communion.”

This article is a brief account about such an initiative by the Sisters of Saint Martha of Antigonish, Nova Scotia. It is also about the congregational journey that led to the project. Known as the “Marthas” in Atlantic Canada as well as on their website¹ this congregation had a peak membership of 460 in 1962. Now they number at 85 members.

I chose this topic because I believe their project demonstrates how congregations in diminishment can draw on the resources of their lived charism, their material and spiritual gifts, and the broader social and theological perspectives with which we now view the world, to create a collaboration that concretely demonstrates integral ecology and ‘economy of communion.’

New Growers – the Project

The “New Growers” project is a gardening apprenticeship program for young adults who want to learn how to do small scale, economically viable gardening. It is hosted on the Marthas’ Motherhouse (Bethany) lands, which have rich soil with a history of mixed farming. Two acres of land are devoted to the program, now in its sixth season.

The Marthas have entered into a partnership with two well-established organic farmers, who mentor up to four prospective new farmers each year. The congregation provides the land, buildings and equipment as well underwriting the educational costs. The mentors coordinate the program, and liaison with the congregation is through the Martha Justice Ministry co-ordinator, who in turn works in collaboration with a core group of sisters and lay members.²

Preparing the Soil...the Congregational Journey

Although the New Growers program began six years ago, the community journey that led to it began some time before that. In retracing it, one can see the co-cultivation of broadening worldviews, expanding theological horizons, and intentional implementation in concrete projects; it was a process that grew like a well-balanced mixed garden.

To begin, there was a history of farming on the land. The farm operation had ended in 1970, though smaller scale gardening continued on the property.

¹ www.themarthas.com

² The ‘Marthas’ did a panel presentation at the JPIC Ontario meeting November 21-22, 2018, on the current structure and functioning of the Martha Justice Ministry, and how it has evolved in the past several years.

In the 1990's, the congregation began to explore in study sessions the insights of Thomas Berry, a Passionist priest and anthropologist, who studied new discoveries in science and viewed life as emerging from a single source; all creation is interconnected. He saw the unfolding of the living universe as sacred story, which he named the Universe Story. "Growing into an awareness of this unfolding mystery and our oneness with it has been a major focus in the Martha's journey with the Universe Story."³

In 2001, an environmental assessment of Motherhouse buildings and lands was conducted. This was the basis for further decisions about the 370 acres of mixed-use lands owned by the congregation.

Five Strategic Directions

In 2002, an Environmental Assessment Resource Committee, which became the Martha Ecology Committee, and in 2015 part of the integrated Martha Justice Ministry, was established to facilitate implementation of the assessment recommendations. Working with consultants, this group set five strategic directions. They were the following: 1) Celebrating and deepening the consciousness of connectedness. 2) Embracing the contemplative dimension of life. 3) Land planning and management. 4) Living in right relationship with all creation. 5) Collaborating and networking with others.

The purpose of the Ecology Committee was to carry out the Chapter 2009 mandate to deepen awareness of the Universe Story, continue ongoing development and implementation of the five strategic directions and to explore more deeply the Christian tradition of creation within the Universe Story.⁴ Additionally, Bethany Retreat Centre was committed to supporting the mandate in its retreats and programs.

Seven years ago, while on a retreat, Florence Kennedy, CSM saw the documentary film *Dirt*, which highlights the crucial importance of soil in the living organism Earth.⁵ It inspired her to look at potential uses of the Congregation's land. This was the spark that led to the establishment of the *New Growers Program*.

Sacred Roots...the Theological Journey

In reflecting on this project and the process that led to it, Donna Brady, CSM underscores that the scientific discoveries about the origins of the universe urge us to rethink the human relationship with God. She says our understanding of God has been one of a distant God, who sends God's Spirit, or Jesus in the Incarnation. If we see God as present in the sacred, evolving creation process, then everything is a unique expression of some aspect of God. If we want to honor God, we need to honor everything God honors and loves.⁶

While the Marthas have been well connected with the earth in their history, their service has been centered on people and human concerns. Now is the time to expand this same love and care to all of creation, which is in great need of tending so that a right relationship with the human community can be restored. She sees the garden project as a small effort in this direction.⁷

Conclusion

³ See Marthas' website, Universe Story.

⁴ See Marthas' website, Ecology Committee.

⁵ This award winning 83 minutes documentary film can be viewed and purchased at www.dirtthemovie.org.

⁶ These ideas are presented more fully in *Laudato Si'*, Ch. 2, *The Gospel of Creation*, and Ch.4, *Integral Ecology*.

⁷ From the 2016 video, *Marthas' Garden*, which can be found on vimeo.com

A thousand words on paper cannot adequately capture what has been such a living, evolving process. For a more thorough, engaging and delightful presentation, view the approximately fourteen minute video *Marthas' Garden*. You will find it a rewarding quarter hour, or maybe half hour, because you may want to watch it again.

For Personal or Community Reflection:

- What is particularly striking or meaningful for you in the Martha's story?
- Does it spark any possibilities for you or your congregation?
- View *Marthas' Garden* on vimeo.com
- Read, or reread, Chapters two and four of *Laudato Si'*.