

A scenic landscape view from a rocky hillside looking down at a coastal town and a large bay. The foreground shows a rocky, reddish-brown slope. Below it, a lush green valley contains a small town with white buildings and a church spire. The town is situated on a peninsula or near a large bay. The water is a deep blue-grey color. In the background, rolling green hills and mountains are visible under a cloudy sky.

*Chapter One*  
*Our Evolving Ecological Consciousness*

# *Our Evolving Ecological Consciousness*



*“Since once again, Lord — though this time not in the forests of the Aisne but in the steppes of Asia — I have neither bread, nor wine, nor altar, I will raise myself beyond these symbols, up to the pure majesty of the real itself; I, your priest, will make the whole earth my altar and on it will offer you all the labors and sufferings of the world... My paten and my chalice are the depths of a soul laid widely open to all the forces which in a moment will rise up from every corner of the earth and converge upon the Spirit.”*

***Teilhard de Chardin, Mass on the World***

*“We need to move from a spirituality of alienation from the natural world to a spirituality of intimacy with the natural world; from a spirituality of the divine as revealed in verbal revelation to a spirituality of the divine as revealed in the visible world about us; from a spirituality concerned with justice merely to humans to a spirituality of justice to the devastated Earth community; from the spirituality of the prophet to the spirituality of the shaman. The sacred community must now be considered the integral community of the entire universe, more immediately the integral community of the planet Earth.”*

***Thomas Berry, An Ecologically Sensitive Spirituality  
in Minding the Spirit***

## *Our Monumental Shift In Consciousness*

Today, new insights provide us with new understanding that call for a monumental shift in our consciousness.

From the early 80s onwards a number of influences were gently and gradually shifting our level of consciousness. The first of these influences came from modern science which gives us a new and comprehensive account of the story of our birth. The new Creation Story, which astounds and confounds, tells us that our universe came into being from a tiny explosion of light almost 14 billion years ago. It also tells us that our galaxy, the Milky Way, is but one of billions of galaxies, each with billions of stars. Our amazing universe is immense; it boggles the mind in any attempt to grasp its expanse. Perhaps the most mind blowing insight offered by the new Creation Story is the fact that since the first flaring forth of light nothing new has come into our universe: that tiny explosion of light contained the potential for all further created things. Everything in the universe is genetically related to us and to everything else because the elements in us and in every other being were formed in ancient stars: all life forms have deep kinship since all are formed of stardust.

Science told the story. Spiritual writers gave it meaning. The works of Teilhard de Chardin, palaeontologist, scientist and mystic, began to slowly influence our consciousness. Teilhard's synthesis of mysticism and science set our hearts on fire, even though we only caught glimpses of his vision. Through working with rock and stone Teilhard saw that matter is alive with an awesome vibrant presence. Mystically he was in tune with "... *the Divine radiating from the depths of a blazing Matter...*"

Building on the work of Teilhard, cultural historian Thomas Berry and cosmologist Brian Swimme affirmed his awareness of the sacredness of matter. For them, the entire universe and every part of it pulsates with bio-spiritual energy from the beginning. Our Mercy Congregational policy for Ecological Responsibility captures the essence of this insight as follows:

*"A growing awareness that the spiritual and psychic energy is present in the Universe from the beginning and is the context in which we humans evolved, gives us a glimpse into the depth of the mystery within and around us."*

The sacredness of Earth is a concept familiar to the Western Province. We grew up in a culture still glowing with embers of Celtic spirituality, a spirituality that saw the presence of the Holy One in all things. However, we had difficulty grasping the revelation that we did not come into Earth but grew out of it.

As Berry states,

*“In our totality we are born of the earth. We are earthlings.  
The earth is our origin, our nourishment, our support, our guide.”*

As we grappled with the implications of these insights and pondered them in our hearts we came to realise that a monumental shift in our consciousness was needed and that this shift required a re-thinking of our understanding of God, ourselves, and our earth. The benign old man in the sky image of God faded before the Incomprehensible Mystery God of the new Creation Story. The imaging of the human as the centre of creation whose role was to have dominion of Earth was replaced by the new story's concept of the human as the consciousness of the cosmos, the universe having evolved to the point of being conscious of itself. Our role in this context is to admire, celebrate and protect the wonders of creation. The understanding of Earth as a static object to be used for our benefit changed to an awareness of Earth as an alive, breathing organism beautifully abundant yet finite.

Another important insight from modern science came through the work of James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis who maintain that Earth is a self-regulating ecosystem, a biological organism in its own right. The understanding of Earth as a self-regulating eco-system where everything is interdependent and interconnected had a major influence on the environmental movement.

The environmental movement came to prominence with the publication of Rachel Carson's mind altering, earth altering book, *Silent Spring*. It presented a view of nature compromised by synthetic pesticides, especially DDT. Once these pesticides entered the biosphere, Carson argued, they not only killed bugs but also made their way up the food chain to threaten bird and fish populations and could eventually cause sickness in children. Following Carson's research, environmentalists worked diligently to make humans aware of how we are destroying the systems of Earth, thereby disturbing the balance of nature and slowly killing Mother Earth herself.

Through deep contemplation on these awe-inspiring, challenging insights from science and environmentalists, we slowly began to hear within ourselves the sound of Earth crying and to respond to that cry. Imperceptibly, we had changed our mind-set. The evolution of our ecological-awareness can be traced in the language and statements of our Chapters (our decision making gatherings that occur every six years). Throughout the 80s and 90s words like 'care of the earth,' 'interconnectedness,' 'stewardship of creation' begin to appear in our documents; compost heaps and recycling bins appear around our convents; an ecological awareness appears in our prayer and ritual.

At our 2007 Provincial Chapter the following statement, which led to our partnership with Vita, was formulated:

*“We commit ourselves to share generously. We will support and resource discerned ministry needs at Congregational, Provincial and Local levels. We will heighten our awareness that our lifestyle choices contribute to extreme poverty.*

*The provincial Team will set up a Working Group to:*

- *Research and identify areas of extreme poverty for a Provincial response*
- *Engage membership and others in this process*
- *Collaborate with relevant groups*
- *Implement, manage and evaluate.”*

It is clear from this statement that we are aware of how our lifestyle impacts directly on people who are poor, and though ‘poor earth’ is not specifically mentioned a heightened consciousness of the devastation humans are bringing to Earth was developing among us. The principle of collaboration mentioned in the statement springs from two sources. The first source comes from our understanding of how earth systems work together in harmony. The second source is a much more practical one: we are an aging province no longer able to give the commitment we gave, particularly in Africa, to working on behalf of poor people and our impoverished earth.

Our collaboration with Vita in southern Ethiopia enhanced our awareness of how our lifestyle choices impact on the lives of poor people particularly on those affected by climate change. Our partnership has also heightened our awareness of how our lifestyle can contribute to climate change.

The journey of our evolving consciousness is amazingly and beautifully acclaimed, and proclaimed in the call of our Congregational Chapter 2012. It reads:

*“As we explore the heart of who we are as Sisters of Mercy and as we discern our mission in our time and in our evolving universe we ask:*

- *In what ways might we respond anew, in hope, to our call to be a compassionate presence of God in our differing realities?*
- *In what ways will we deepen our understanding of the diversity that is among us?*
- *In what ways will we allow our place in the interdependent and interconnected community of all of life to influence us?”*

We continue our journey into greater awareness, knowing in the depth of our cosmic souls that the Chapter Statement is a radical call to reconnect with our deepest roots and to find our rightful place in the web of life as one species among many.

As we journey we remember the advice of farmer-poet Wendell Berry:

*“And the world cannot be discovered by a journey of miles, no matter how long, but only by a spiritual journey, a journey of one inch, very arduous and humbling and joyful, by which we arrive at the ground at our own feet, and learn to be at home.”*

The challenge at the 2007 Provincial Chapter (Gathering) is illustrated below:



This process of theological reflection, informed by the New Creation Story, leads into action.

*Kathleen Glennon*