

## **Roman Catholic Religious Orders**

There are references in the New Testament to unmarried men and women who served the local communities in special ways. Later, this celibate tradition continued as some Christians went into the deserts of Egypt and Syria to live their commitment in solitude. These men and women were variously called “hermits,” “anchorites” and “The Desert Fathers.” In the wilderness, they found a peace and tranquillity that was conducive to prayer, contemplation and reflection. Saint Anthony (d.350) said that, in creation, he could read the word of God.

Demonic powers also resided in the desert. The anchorites saw their presence in the wilderness as a process of re-creating an earthly paradise, of re-establishing the dominion over all life that existed before the Fall. The stories of encounters with wild animals illustrated their spiritual power. The monk Florentius had a bear as companion. The animals taught the hermits what was poisonous.

Their spirituality was to encounter a strange territory and move from conflict to harmony, to merge the natural with the supernatural until the two were indistinguishable. This spirituality influenced Celtic spirituality where the theme of voyage or pilgrimage provided a heightened awareness of the natural environment. Celtic spirituality, in turn, influenced Saint Francis of Assisi.

Some men and women of the desert gathered disciples around them and formed communities. These groups became the “cenobites” and their communities came to be characterized by vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. The members choose not to own anything, to live as celibates and to obey their abbot or abbess.

Today, there are several thousand orders and congregations in the Roman Catholic Church. Many use a rule that has been influenced by one of the four largest orders; The Benedictines, Franciscans, Dominicans and Jesuits. Since the 1960's, the Maryknoll family has developed a particularly contemporary response to environmental issues.

### The Benedictine Tradition

The Benedictine view of nature is grounded in their commitment to a specific place, their efforts to be self-sustaining and the rhythm of their daily prayer. Early in the Sixth Century, Saint Benedict of Norcia wrote a series of guidelines for living together as a religious community. The Rule of Saint Benedict was used by his immediate followers and was also adopted by many existing communities. It became the principle guide for most religious orders before the Middle Ages. Saint Scholastica, Benedict's sister, founded a women's branch.

The Rule is characterized by a commitment to a specific monastery, a daily order that includes chanting psalms and canticles in the chapel seven times a day, manual labor, private prayer, simplicity, frugality, humility, obedience and hospitality. The routine of prayer and the focus on frugality shaped their view of nature.

The collection of psalms and canticles is called "The Divine Office." The psalms themselves, coming from the Old Testament, contain many images of nature that are meant to express the majesty of God revealed in the grandeur of creation. Chanting the office seven times a day embeds the images of nature in their minds and gives a rhythm to their lives. The routine places time against the backdrop of eternity. The Office of Lauds, chanted at sunrise, is constructed to view creation and redemption as two aspects of the same divine activity.

Some time each day is to be spent in labor. The things of the house, buckets and spades; and the things of the earth, trees and plants, are to be respected. Work is seen as an act of co-creation or ongoing cooperation with the Creator.

The view of nature within the Benedictine tradition reflects a basic Christian position. There is both a natural and a supernatural order. The supernatural order is not opposed to, but is above nature. Devotion to the spiritual life does not destroy but perfects and elevates the natural order. Creation will also be delivered from slavery and corruption. God remains distinct from his creation, but the universe has a dynamic structure. It is dependent on God and is constantly being created by God in conjunction with those creatures who cooperate.

There were also other perspectives in Europe between the Fifth and Thirteenth Centuries. A Neoplatonic view exaggerated the distinction between the spiritual and the natural order to a point where the natural was disdained. From the 8th century on, there was also a rationalism that sought explicit explanations for everything. These trends would have influenced individual Benedictines, but did not affect the basics of Benedictine life.

Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) was a Benedictine nun who wrote treatises on theology, philosophy, cosmology and medicine and then wrote music to illuminate her vision. She saw human nature as a microcosm that contains the entire creation within it. Because they are so closely interconnected, the natural elements and humanity affect each other. Because of sin, creation turns against humans. In Christ, we can restore the balance. She sees music as the highest form of praising God. Through music, we integrate body, mind, heart and spirit and thus celebrate heavenly harmony here on earth.

The Benedictine monasteries were a major means of preserving and spreading Western civilization in the centuries of transition from the Roman Empire into the Middle Ages. Towns

grew up around monasteries. The monastic schools provided one of the few means of education and the monks both developed and taught agricultural techniques. The early development of Europe consisted in cutting back forests and reclaiming wet lands for agriculture. The monks were at the forefront of this movement.

As Europe approached the Middle Ages, a need for reform arose. Feudal Lords were appropriating monastic revenues. The recitation of the Office had expanded in length, manual work decreased and the rule was interpreted rigidly. Besides monastic reform, several popes called for reforms on a larger scale within the whole Church. One need was a concern for apostolic life, for the care and education of people.

One monastic reform came through Saint Robert of Molesne (d.1111) and Saint Bernard of Clairvaux (d.1153). They broke with the mainstream Benedictines and founded the Cistercian Order at Citeaux in France. By this time, much of Europe had become farmland and the Cistercians moved out into wilder country. Their writings expressed a sense of movement from wilderness to paradise. They still followed the Benedictine Rule.

Whereas The Desert Fathers saw beauty in an unspoiled wilderness, Saint Bernard emphasized the beauty of labor in preparing the fields. There should be a profound harmony between the natural beauty of the site and the monastic life set within it. Once nature has become fertile and purposeful, it takes on the utmost significance. Irrigation channels and waterways within the monastery provide sport and food for fish, refreshment for people, nourishment for gardens and a means of cleansing. Humanity and creation achieve perfection together because of human efforts to tend and organize the environment and creation's willing response to humanity's guidance. Creation repays human care by aiding people physically and spiritually. They are partners in a common effort.

Cistercian monastic architecture was medieval and reflected the simplicity and balance of their lifestyle. The floor plan and the monastery's position within the environment were meant to reflect the harmony of creation and the presence of the divine within creation. Light, space, shape and texture were used to reflect this sense.

Because the Cistercians became involved in work away from the monastery, a reform within the Cistercian community began in the 16th Century and developed until 1892 when a group of Cistercians became independent. The new group was centered at La Trappe in France. This reform revolved around a stronger emphasis on contemplation rather than apostolic activities. The group is known as The Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance. They are commonly called "The Trappists." Thomas Merton was a Trappist and his writings have greatly influenced contemporary understandings of the relationships between prayer, justice and the environment. Today, there are 1400 communities worldwide who follow the Rule of Saint Benedict.

Over the last thirty years, contemporary currents and attitudes toward nature have influenced monasticism. In an effort to understand present thinking, a survey was sent out to 52 Cistercian and Trappist monasteries in 14 countries. An effort was made to distribute the questionnaire to every third person. 147 questionnaires were returned. Here is a summary:

When asked if their sense of the sanctity of creation has grown during their years in the monastery, all but three said it had. Two of the remaining three responded that they had always had a strong sense of nature as sacred.

To the question asking what people or published materials have influenced their view of creation, about half indicated specific books and authors. The Bible was the most frequently mentioned influence, followed by Jesuit Teilhard de Chardin, Trappist Thomas Merton,

Franciscan Saint Francis of Assisi, Passionist Thomas Berry, Saint Paul, William Wordsworth, Matthew Fox, Orion Magazine, David Thoreau, Julian of Norwich, Rachel Carlson and Trappist Charles Cummings who wrote a book entitled “Eco-Spirituality.”

To the question, “What do you see in the Benedictine and Cistercian tradition that contributes to an ecological perspective?” the strongest response was the Rule of Saint Benedict itself, especially a sentence that says that the monastic should reverence all things as if they were the sacred vessels of the altar. Living in a natural setting, working the land, experiencing the seasons, and loving the place were also frequent answers. In addition, there were many mentions of their life style and a daily order that stresses simplicity, silence, solitude, prayer, the rhythm of the liturgical year and the liturgy itself.

One question asked, “Would you please detail any concrete action that your monastery is taking that would reflect a concern for the environment?” In response, many mentioned recycling. Most made reference to responsible farming methods that include organic gardening, erosion control and the use of environmentally safe chemicals. Some mentioned significant proactive measures. The Trappist Monastery at Conyers, Georgia, converted 700 acres of land from swamp into wetlands. A Trappist monastery in Indonesia dedicates a quarter of their land as a natural reserve. A monastery in Australia has been replanting five kilometers of river frontage damaged by overgrazing since 1840. The Trappist Monastery at New Melleray, Iowa, publishes a quarterly newsletter with a strong environmental focus. The monks at Vina, California took action against a nuclear power plant and are founding members of Dear Creek Conservancy. The Trappistine monastery at Whitethorn in Northern California was instrumental in stopping a dam on the Mattole River and preserving 1200 acres of old-growth redwoods as the “Sanctuary Forest.” Members of the monastery sit on the board of directors. While most Trappist

monasteries are involved in some farming, the sisters at Whitethorn are more focused on preserving a natural environment. Monasteries in Ireland, New Zealand, Hong Kong, Canada, Iowa, Oregon, Nigeria and Eritrea have undertaken extensive reforestation projects. A monastery in Cameroon is replacing eucalyptus they planted fifty years ago because eucalyptus absorbs too much water from the land. The Trappists in Utah have been working for 53 years to preserve 120 acres of rangeland. Several other monasteries reported working with local conservation groups and several have received awards for their work in conservation.

When asked if the environment is one of the major concerns of our times, 98% said yes. To the question, “Does the Bible clearly call us to a reverence and respect for the earth?” over 90% said that it does.

## The Franciscans

The Franciscan view of nature flows out of the nature mysticism of their founder, Saint Francis of Assisi. As Western civilization entered the Middle Ages, a new prosperity created capitalism and a middle class. There was also a universal call for reform within the Catholic Church. A significant mode of that reform came in the person of Saint Francis of Assisi (1182-1226) and his founding of the Franciscan Order. The order was approved by edict of Pope Innocent III on April 16, 1209.

With the Benedictines, very little is known about the personality of Saint Benedict. It is his written rule that has shaped the order. With Francis, his personality and charism dominate and it was hard to capture in a written rule. The Franciscans became the first of a different type of order. They are friars and mendicants, not monks. Like the monks, they have a distinctive

habit (robe) and chant the psalms and canticles of the Bible in common. But unlike the monks, they have a strong emphasis on apostolic work, on preaching and serving people in a variety of ways. They move easily from place to place and are not bound to a particular monastery.

Francis' father was a wealthy cloth merchant who also bought up small farms and expelled the tenants. Francis reacted dramatically to his father's life style and attitude. He saw power, prestige and possessions as leading to violence and so he embraced humility, poverty and the cross. Much of his life was spent alone in nature like the Desert Fathers and the Celtic hermits. In this liminal position, he had a direct and mystical experience of God in creation.

What is unique to Francis is that he is the first known person within the Christian tradition to exhibit a nature mysticism. Previous ascetics were ambivalent. They saw the natural world too much as the realm of demonic powers. For Francis, his union with nature became a mode of God's communication of himself to humanity and humanity's union with God through a perceived presence in the physical world.

There is a charming fresco by Giotto in the Basilica at Assisi. Here, Francis is seen preaching to birds. The famous incident illustrates the Saint's sense of the interdependence he saw in creation, an interdependence that called for respect and obedience. The birds praise God with their song. They each have autonomous worth and beauty and yet are brothers and sisters performing their divinely allotted function. The birds respect Francis because he is also a servant of God. Their response encouraged him to sustain his new perspective and they encourage him to carry his preaching to people. By implicitly humanizing creation through affective links, Francis made it easier for others to share his bond with creation. It was Francis and the early Franciscans who introduced the use of the crèche, the manger scenes that dramatize the Christmas event.

The legend of the wolf of Gubbio tells of a hungry wolf that was terrorizing a town. Francis went out and preached to the wolf and then preached penance and peace to the villagers. He was thus able to convince the people that the wolf was simply hungry and needed food. He forged a covenant wherein the people agreed to respect the wolf and provide him with food.

Like the monks before him, the psalms and canticles from the Bible shaped Francis' expressions. But unique to Francis, is the influence of the songs and lyrics of the troubadours. The troubadours were wandering musicians who composed and sang love songs. Here, Francis spiritualizes the mistral's interplay of natural setting and human experience, an interplay that elicits love and joy. Francis embraced and expressed the chivalric values of beneficent magnanimity and deference to all.

Like the ascetics before him, Francis also saw nature as allegorical. He had a particular affection for worms because there is a passage in the New Testament where Christ says, "I am a worm and no man." So Francis would carefully pick worms up off the road and place them in safer places. He saw Christ in the worms. The sun is like God because it is beautiful in itself and it gives light.

The clearest illustration of the Franciscan view of creation can be found in Francis' Canticle to Creation. The hymn praises the four elements; fire, air, water, and earth, which were seen as the components of all life forms. In the Canticle, he expresses the intrinsic goodness of the created world, the interdependence of all life, and his passion for beauty and peace. Because we call God "Father," creation becomes our brothers and sisters. He calls for a fraternal model, rather than a model of stewardship. We are to be detached from creatures in order not to possess them. He goes so far, at times, to say that we should even obey animals. The Franciscans were a

dynamic argument against the Cathars; a heretical group at the time who held that “the spiritual” had been created by a beneficent divine power and the natural world by an evil one.

Francis forbade his followers to cut down a whole tree. Part needed to be left intact so that new sprouts could bud. Until recently, a Franciscan needed permission from the provincial before cutting down a tree. Francis spent the last years of his life in the wilderness.

Saint Francis represents a watershed in the development of Christian views of nature. Some spiritualities after him flow from him. Others, such as the Rheinland mystics, continue a Neoplatonic tradition.

The saint of Assisi fulfills Arne Naess’ definition of a deep ecologist because he emphasized the diversity and intrinsic value of creation and because he addresses the reform of behaviors that threaten to destroy entire ecosystems. On Easter Sunday, 1980, Pope John Paul II proclaimed Saint Francis of Assisi the patron saint of ecology, following the suggestion 13 years earlier by Lynn White, Jr. in his seminal article in Science.

Today, Franciscan men and women continue their founder’s work by focusing on the changes of hearts and minds needed to live in balance. Franciscan Keith Warner trained in geography and worked for a reforestation cooperative in the Pacific Northwest that planted over 600,000 trees. He is on the steering committee of the California Sustainable Agriculture Working Group and has lobbied with The Religious Campaign for Forest Conservation. Warner also campaigns against what he calls “Birdbath Franciscanism,” a superficial and romantic view of Francis depicted in flower garden statuary. He sees his founder as much more ecologically radical.

Father Richard Rohr, also a Franciscan, founded and is director of The Center for Action and Contemplation in Albuquerque, New Mexico. The center’s aim is to seek a balanced

life by bringing together the worlds of spirituality, psychology, social action and environmental concerns.

Former Franciscan Leonardo Boff is a Brazilian and a major figure of liberation theology. In Ecology and Liberation (1995) and Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor (1997), he brings together poverty, ecological degradation and liberation. For Boff, the fate of the rain forest and the fate of Amazonian Indians are inseparably linked.

Franciscan sisters run Michaela Farm in Oldenburg, Indiana, where their aim is to seek and teach skills in organic food production and foster a simple lifestyle in harmony with the earth. Sister Rita Wienken has similar objectives with her Franciscan Earth Literacy Action Center on 500 acres in Tiffin, Ohio.

## The Dominicans

The Dominican view of nature is based on the fact that they were founded to combat a heresy advocating that the natural world was evil. On January 17, 1217, just eight years after Pope Innocent III approved the rule of Saint Francis, Pope Honorius III ratified the constitutions for the Dominican Order. Like the Franciscans, the first Dominican priests were friars. They worked outside the monastery and were founded to combat the Albigensian heresy. Today, the Dominican family includes sisters and lay people..

The Albigenses espoused a form of Manichaeism, a cosmic dualism, holding that the devil was actually a rival god who created matter. The soul is imprisoned in matter and the objective is to liberate the soul. Therefore, they discouraged marriage and saw death as the final

release. For them, Christ was not the Son of God but an angel with a corporate appearance. The first objective of the Dominicans was to restore a Christian view of creation.

The Dominicans call themselves “The Order of Preachers.” But “preaching” here is not restricted to a discourse on Sunday morning. They see their charism as closely following the Old Testament definition of a prophet as one called by God to speak for God. They say of themselves that their objective is to contemplate and to share the fruits of their contemplation. Like the Franciscans, they embrace an incarnational spirituality: They believe that all life is sacred because God became human in Jesus Christ. Through the centuries, the Dominicans have been heavily involved in education, scholarship, and missions.

Fra Angelico (1400?-1455) was a Dominican and a painter who continued the work of Giotto in giving more natural shape and color to works of art.

Dominican Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) is considered the greatest of the medieval philosophers and theologians. His Summa Theologica is built on Aristotle and provided a synthesis of theology up to that point in time. Saint Thomas presents the knowledge we get from revelation, our experience and our capacity to reason as compatible and complementary ways of knowing. He set the stage for the later development of the scientific method.

A recent movement within the religious orders of women in the United States is to convert the lands that once served as novitiates, mother houses and schools into organic farms and ecological learning centers. The Dominican sisters have been at the forefront of this movement and Genesis Farm is their flagship.

Founded by Sister Miriam Therese MacGillis and the Dominican Sisters of Caldwell, New Jersey, the farm focuses on learning and teaching a new cosmology. They also sponsor a large, community-supported biodynamic garden. Their teaching is build around the works of

Thomas Berry, Brian Swimme and a section of Saint Thomas Aquinas' Summa Theologica. In Part I, Question 47 of his Summa, Aquinas says that God is most fully revealed, not through one species only, but through the whole universe because one creature alone could not adequately represent His goodness.

Genesis Farm uses the structure of a story. The universe is a series of unfolding stories. Humanity needs to listen to the stories and individuals need to see the story of their lives in the context of the universe of which they are a part. MacGillis also uses the image of a punchbowl on a table surrounded by glasses. Each glass is a religious or ethnic tradition that holds some wisdom. When the glasses are emptied into the punchbowl, the wisdom is not lost but enlarged. The families who sponsor the organic garden at Genesis Farm are presently founding a grammar school where their children can progressively learn the stories of the universe.

The Dominican sisters also operate Sophia Garden in Amityville, New York and Siena Spiritual Center in Water Mill, Long Island. They have similar farms and learning centers in Springfield, Illinois; Ponchatoula, Louisiana; Blacklick, and Bath, Ohio; Houston and Boerne, Texas; Plainville, Massachusetts; St. Catherine, Kentucky; and Pawnee Rock, Kansas. The Dominicans *EarthLinks* in Denver, Colorado endeavors to link people, especially the economically poor, to each other and nature through hikes, garden projects and school programs. Sister Mary Ellen Leciejewski, based at the Dominican hospital in Santa Cruz, California, works full time on issues related to the impact of health services on the environment. She says, "Our ecological commitment is integral to our healing mission. There is a profound connection that exists between healing the individual and healing the planet." The Dominicans also run an ecological farm in Benin City, Nigeria.

## The Jesuits

Saint Ignatius Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits, had a vision, while praying on the banks of the Cardoner River in Eastern Spain, of God's abiding presence in all of creation. He later had a second vision of Christ carrying a cross for the salvation of the world. Putting the two visions together, he developed a series of meditations and contemplations called The Spiritual Exercises, in which, a person is guided to enter the vision of God's presence in and love for the world. From there, one moves to a deeper realization of where and how God might be calling that person to serve.

The Jesuit order itself was founded on August 15, 1534 at Montmartre in Paris. Pope Paul III approved their constitutions in 1540. With the Jesuits, a third type of order comes onto the scene. The Jesuits were to have no special clothing and did not pray the Liturgy of the Hours in common. Their lifestyle and daily order was to focus on what one Jesuit writer called "a mysticism of service."

From their beginning, Jesuits have been involved in education, scholarship and the foreign missions. Early Jesuits were colleagues of Galileo and over 30 lunar formations bear Jesuit names. Athanasius Kircher (d.1680) was a major link between medieval and modern science. Jirí Kamel, a Czech Jesuit (d.1706), sent drawings and specimens of insects and plants from Manila to the Royal Society of London. He recognized strychnine in a type of bean and camellia tea is named after him. Christopher Clavius (d.1612) designed the Gregorian calendar and introduced the decimal point to mathematics. The Jesuits introduced geometry and Western astronomical instruments to China in the seventeenth century.

Teilhard de Chardin (d. 1955) was a French Jesuit paleontologist. He was concerned with the split between his spirituality and what his fellow scientists were saying about the universe's evolution towards entropy. He developed a schema wherein he saw the possibility that the universe was rather evolving towards a deeper spiritual unification.

Gerard Manly Hopkins (d.1889), was an English Jesuit poet and artist. He was acutely aware of the beauties of creation and coined the word "inscape" for what he saw as the unique and particular quality of each object in nature. The experience of the particular, of the "deep-down" beauty, leads to an experience of the transcendent. He had a Wordsworthian feeling for nature coupled with a sense of nature as an expression of God. The squalor of industrial towns and the oppression of the working class horrified him. His sonnet, "God's Grandeur," begins with the lines; "The world is charged with the grandeur of God. It will flame out, like shining from shook foil; it gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil crushed." He then goes on to describe how the Industrial Revolution has damaged the earth. But he ends the poem by saying, "And, for all this, nature is never spent. There lives the dearest freshness deep down things. And though the last lights off the black West went – Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs – Because the Holy Ghost over the bent world broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings." He poetically expresses the heart of Jesuit spirituality.

Today, Jesuit John Surette is co-founder of Spiritearth in Arlington, Massachusetts. The educational center is built on the principal that an openness and reverence before the universe allows community to form and justice to flourish. They would like to see humanity enter an ecozoic era. Another Jesuit, Al Fritsch trained as a chemist, worked for Ralph Nader's Center for the Study of Responsive Law and then founded Appalachia Science in the Public Interest in Mt. Vernon, Kentucky. The center is devoted to the notion of sustainability and has developed

solar energy applications, organic gardens, artificial wetlands and dry composting toilets. They are helping to develop ginseng as an alternative crop to tobacco and extensive lumbering in Appalachia. The center has done over 200 assessments in 34 states and consulted in Haiti, Peru, and the Dominican Republic. Fritsch would like to see a 12-step program addressing people's addiction to material things.

The Jesuits have assisted 60 religious groups in ecological improvements to their property. Jesuits also teach ecology, sustainability and eco-spirituality in their many educational institutions.

## Maryknoll

The Maryknoll order is a younger group within the Catholic Church and their approach to nature is uniquely modern. They were founded early in the 20th Century as an American foreign missionary society of priests, brothers and sisters. Today, they include lay people and call themselves the Maryknoll Family.

Working in South America, they have extensive exposure to liberation theology and as that movement started "turning green" in the early 1990's, so did they. Maryknoll founded Orbis Press, whose publication list includes books on the environment.

Maryknoll lay people are involved with CEDICAM in Oaxaca, Mexico. The organization works with Indian campesinos and encourages reforestation and crop diversification throughout the Mixteca Alta region. This group has established tree nurseries in 22 farming communities and has planted more than 150,000 trees.

Maryknoll sisters run the Center for the Integrity of Creation in Baguio, The Philippines. The area is threatened by excessive logging. The Center focuses on education for biodiversity and sustainable development.

Maryknoll Father Herb Gappa runs an anti-erosion and tree-planting project in the Shinyanga District of Tanzania. Maryknollers are also working to conserve green space and diversify agriculture in Barquisimeto, Venezuela. In Chile, they develop ecological education units for high schools in Linares, work in the Spirituality and Ecology Center in San Nicolas, provide workshops on spirituality and ecology in Santiago and develop an awareness of the illegal seizure and logging of native trees in Chol Chol. The logging has led to a drop in the water table. Hazardous chemicals and pesticides have also been introduced.

#### Other Religious Orders

There is a strong movement today to network, to link and affiliate. A project or center might not be staffed exclusively by member of one order. Individual religious from different congregations join local and national conservation groups. The Maryknoll project in Baguio, The Philippines, includes on its staff members of the Redemptorist and Divine Word orders. The Sisters of Charity, Religious of the Sacred Heart and Passionists have projects and centers similar to those run by the Dominicans.

The Global Education Association is an international network and resource for ecologically related issues. Within GEA, The Religious Orders Partnership includes more than 150 orders. Their aim is to cooperate in using their resources of schools, universities, health care

facilities, community services, retreat centers and churches to further a concern and care for the earth. Most religious orders include ecology within their programs for social justice.

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#### Further Reading

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See also: Berry, Thomas; Christianity (8e)-Creation Spirituality; St Francis of Assisi; Genesis Farm; Hildegard of Bingen.

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