

By Jean Pruitt, M.M.

Respecting web of life

Maryknoll Sisters in Philippines promote concern for God's creation as critical moral issue

Noting that only 20 percent of the Philippines, once blanketed in tropical forests, now has significant cover, researcher Peter Dauvergne says, "At the current rate of legal and illegal logging, the primary forests of the Philippines will disappear in the next decade."

Alarmed by such destruction, Maryknoll Sisters serving in the Philippines have been promoting concern for the environment as a moral issue for the past decade.

In Manila, Sister Marisa Lichauco planted a prayer garden and mini-forest on a college campus. In Baguio, Maryknoll Sisters opened a Center for the Integrity of Creation. In Calapagan, Lupon, Davao Oriental, Sister Leonila Bermisa is consultant for a group involved in

Sister Marisa Lichauco, right, tends mini-forest on college campus in Manila.





Maryknoll Sisters' Center for the Integrity of Creation rose from an earthquake.

conservation and organic farming.

Inspiration from a variety of sources prompted the Sisters' work. In 1988, the Catholic bishops of the Philippines in a pastoral letter entitled *What Is Happening to Our Beautiful Land?* reported, "All the living systems in the land and in the seas around us are being ruthlessly exploited. The damage to date is extensive and, sad to say, it is often irreversible. As we reflect on what is happening in the light of the Gospel, we are convinced that this assault on creation is sinful and contrary to the teachings of our faith."

The following year, Sister Marisa Lichauco, with the endorsement of the administration of



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Miriam College, began a mission response by planting saplings in a two-acre open area of the campus. Later, on a tour of Sister Marisa's project, Rina Jimenez-David, a columnist for the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, saw the narra (a tree indigenous to the Philippines) and other saplings. "I was astounded," she wrote, "by how tall the trees had grown though planted only six years ago... Walking through Sister Marisa's forest was a prayer in itself."

"I think my environmental awareness began in childhood," says Lichauco, a native of the Philippines. "I remember a school exercise planting a bean. When I saw the bean sprout, I was filled with awe. I've been a plant lover ever since."

In 1990, the Maryknoll Sisters' General Assembly stated, "We believe our mission response is to reverence the sacredness of creation (and) to articulate a contemporary mission spirituality to respond to the cry of the cosmos."

That same year a violent earthquake devastated northern Luzon, destroying the Maryknoll Sisters' house in Baguio. Sent by her congregation to oversee the clearing of the ruins, Maryknoll Sister Ann Braudis began asking neighbors, most of whom were indigenous Ig-



Co-workers Merci Dulawan and Sister Ann Braudis.

rot, how the Sisters might best help meet their urgent needs. Joined by local laity—religion teacher Mary Jane Paducar, civil engineer Elpidio Siruno and an Igorot teacher Merci Dulawan—Braudis heard gold miners from Itogon complain of unsafe conditions and listened to women laborers tell of low pay they got for long hours of crushing rocks for pavement. All voiced their concern for the environment, threatened by a government dam project and excessive logging.

The discussions inspired a creatively designed building, replacing the leveled house, now serving

as the Maryknoll Sisters' Center for Justice and Peace and for the Integrity of Creation. Braudis has been joined by Sisters Amelia Omaña, Carmela Carpio and Dolores Mitch. The Sisters and lay leaders conduct retreats and seminars on sustainable development and workshops on community organizing for miners, laborers and landless farm families.

They also teach by showing. On their property they have planted an extensive herb garden for medicinal uses. Braudis has created eight "cosmic stations." One site has a fresh water pond where visitors reflect on the emergence of life; another overlooking a centuries-old rock formation offers reflection on the emergence of the earth's crust.

Braudis' interest in ecology began in South America, where she served as a Daughter of Charity be-

fore transferring to Maryknoll. In Bolivia, she worked with Daughter of Charity Elizabeth Barry, who introduced her to the writings of her brother Father Thomas Barry, a Passionist priest, renowned theologian on ecology and author of the best-seller *Dream of the Earth*.

After she entered Maryknoll in 1989, Braudis was invited to work on ecology concerns for the Peace Institute of Notre Dame University in Cotabato in the southern Philippines. "The message," Braudis says, "is all about the sacredness of the earth. It's not protection of flora and fauna. It's rather the much deeper understanding that all forms of life on our living planet are profoundly connected. There is an inescapable community of life."

In the mountains of Calapagan, on the outskirts of Lupon, another Filipina Maryknoll Sister Leonila

Maryknoll Sister Leonila Bermisa uses slogan on all schools in the Philippines to promote critical analysis of development projects of the government and their effects on environment.

Bermisa serves as consultant and mentor for a group of farmers involved in serious discussion and prayer around earth issues. The group has set aside communal land for a biodiversity project. "It is really a simple but seldom practiced view of respecting the web of life," a farmer who is also a church lay leader says. "It is about respecting the tiny organisms that live in the soil, the spiders in the canopy of the rain forest, the weeds in the garden and the water buffalo that plows our rice fields."

The farmers have built a piggery, taking care not to cut trees that help prevent erosion. They use the waste generated by the piggery to organically fertilize the terraced fields. "These farmers have decided to become responsible partners on their land," Bermisa says, "turning back decades of random destruction in solidarity with others growing in the consciousness of the fragile web of life." ✧

Sister Jean Pruitt is a writer/photographer for the Maryknoll Sisters Communications department.



Sister Bibiana Bunuan in herb garden of Maryknoll Sisters' center in Baguio.



Photos by Pruitt/Philippines

Recommended resources:

- *Shadows in the Forest*, by Peter Dauvergne, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997.
- *Earth Community Earth Ethics*, by Larry L. Rasmussen, Orbis Books, 1996.
- *Plundering Paradise: The Struggle for the Environment in the Philippines*, by Robin Broad, with John Cavanagh, University of California Press, 1993.
- The Oct.-Dec. 1997 issue of *WorldViews: A Quarterly Review of Resources for Education and Action* features a guide to resources on Southeast Asia's forests. Send \$5 to WorldViews, 464 19th St., Oakland, CA 94612.