

Stations of the Cosmos

By Sharon Abercrombie

DEEP WITHIN a lush, mountainous pine forest in Baguio, northern Philippines, visitors will see a sign. "All who enter here enjoy." It will be difficult for them to do anything else. The half-day's journey they are about to embark upon will probably be like nothing else they've ever experienced.

They will discover a large, white egg, cracked just enough to reveal the baby dinosaur inside. As they chuckle, oooh and ah, their guide will invite them to name the not exactly delicate but nonetheless engaging young'un.

Another part of the path will lead the visitors straight ways into bursts of fuchsia blossoms. They serve as the color-laden frame for another sign, which tells them they have reached the 130 million-years-ago mark, when

flowers first spread upon the earth.

They will sit quietly in an ancient cave, fixing their gazes upon a pottery burial jar. They will reflect upon the reality of death, and its place in the progression of the New Story. They will create a ritual, which honors the gifts of the indigenous Philippine tribal people who inhabit the bioregion to this day. A modern-day tribal man and potter, Erdy Laluan, created the jar especially for this burial cave.

Our travelers are walking the 14 Stations of The Cosmic Journey. Like the ancient Christian Stations of the Cross which take people on a meditative, prayerful journey depicting events leading up to Jesus' crucifixion, this particular adaptation tells the chronological story of the Universe. Inspired by the work of Brian Swimme, mathematical cosmologist, and Thomas Berry, geologist, their creators were three Maryknoll Missionary Sisters, a community of neighborhood artists, former students and other friends.

The Stations are part of the Maryknoll Ecological Sanctuary, a project that includes a retreat center combining eco-spirituality with the arts and the new science. Besides the cosmic journey, the sanctuary also features a bio-shelter and a creative arts school based on the New Story for 15 deaf children.

The bioshelter is a prototype of ecological sustainability. Besides using recycled materials from the ruins of an old convent, the house includes solar heating. Rainwater running down the skylights and roof is collected and piped out into an area where a future wetland is planned, explained Maryknoll Sister Anne Marie Braudis, one of the sanctuary co-founders and its chief inspiration. The convent serves as a prototype-teaching center where people can come to learn about sustainable architecture.

Her own visit to Thomas Berry's spiritual home, a seminary in Ontario, and seeing first hand the terrible aftermaths of an earthquake in Baguio, were factors leading up to the Maryknoll Ecological Sanctuary, said Sister Anne Marie. Now on a year's sabbatical to study

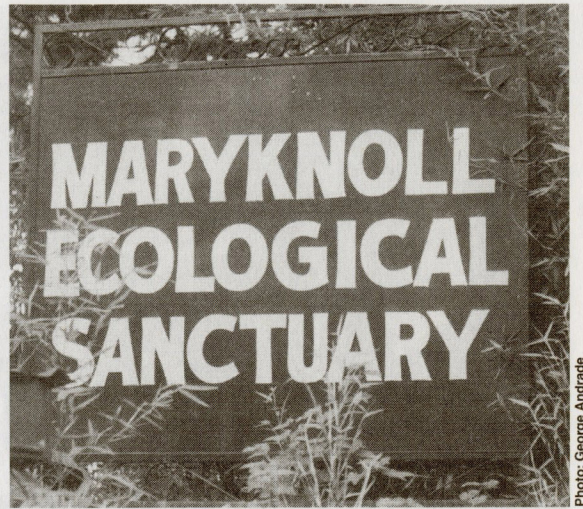


Photo: George Andrade



Emerging Dinosaur (sculptor: Erdy Laluan)

Photo: George Andrade

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Sisters Peg Dillon, Anne Marie Braudis, Dolores Mitch

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for a master's degree at the University of Creation Spirituality/Naropa University in Oakland, California, the Maryknollers traced key elements of her own journey and how they played a role in her present ministry as center director and chief fundraiser for sanctuary programs.

Sister Anne Marie first discovered the work of Swimme and Berry during the 1980s. Like so many who become enchanted by their reinterpretation of the Universe story, she attended their lectures whenever she could. In 1989, she met Thomas at a Teilhard lecture. At the time, members and friends of his religious community were beginning to create visual interpretations of the New Story through the medium of installation art. Sister Anne Marie heard about them. In 1990 she traveled to Ontario to see them for herself. The stations were very simple, but the manner in which

they put the larger context of the New Story within the context of that particular Canadian bioregion called out to her.

The same year, Sister Anne Marie's community offered her an opportunity to work in the Philippines where the Maryknoll order was concerned over the ecological crisis that was taking place because of industrialization.

Sister Anne Marie arrived in mid-summer shortly after a 7.7 earthquake rocked Baquio. Suffering and death were everywhere, she recalls. Her own community's 70-year old convent was destroyed, as was one-third of the elementary school.

As a newcomer, Sister Anne Marie quickly learned that inhabitants of the tourist town suspected that large-scale mining and timber operations by multinational corporations had contributed to the earthquake's

devastating consequences. She remembers how her heart turned over in agony when she saw examples of open pit gold mining operations, where whole forests were reduced to a gaping hole in the ground. "Nothing was left. Even the flies were gone. The Earth was begging for attention."

Sister Anne Marie sat down with other community members. What should they do? Rebuild and resume business as usual? Or, was the Earth calling them to do something else?



Photo: George Andrade



Photos: George Andrade



The Fourteen Stations at the Maryknoll Sanctuary

- ◆ The universe begins—15 Billion years ago
- ◆ Planet Earth emerges—5 B years ago
- ◆ The oceans are the birthplace of life—3.5 B years ago
- ◆ Dinosaurs on the scene—235 Million years ago
- ◆ The mammals arrive—220 M years ago
- ◆ Birds take flight—150 M years ago
- ◆ Flowers spread on Earth—130 M years ago
- ◆ The primates come forth—65 M years ago
- ◆ Early humans live in caves—50,000 years ago
- ◆ The hunting and gathering age
- ◆ The village period develops—10,000 years ago
- ◆ Earth gives sweet water (shown on the trail where fresh ground water appears)
- ◆ The emergence of Earth's religious traditions
- ◆ The scientific and technological age (bioshelter)

The Sisters posed their question to teachers, parents and to the community. The collective decision was: rebuild the school, but phase it out grade by grade. Turn it into an alternative education center, which combined spirituality, ecology and the arts.

It was a six-year project, utilizing funds from the sale of a Maryknoll property. Their convent, the bio-center, combines the best of sustainable architecture and reflects the building style of the area. Townspeople, alumni from the old school, and local artists donated their talents, said Sister Anne Marie.

The school janitor designed and built the first station, which depicts the “big bang” flame. “He put three rocks together. It was perfect,” she marveled. A team of volunteers got together, and using their creativity, built the burial cave from concrete. “It looks so much like a real cave, no one would dream it was a construction project,” she said.

Children in the deaf school are an integral part of the Sanctuary project. They might not be able to hear music, but they feel the vibrations, she noted. Everything they learn about the universe story is based on their own tribal culture, honoring the flowers and animals indigenous to the bioregion. “One week, they’ll recreate the story of the bumble bees. The next week, they’ll do art and dance around the death of the rainforest.”

The children are also an integral part of the regular rituals, which are held at the Sanctuary. Recently, on the 10th anniversary of the earthquake, they helped to dig holes for bamboo poles. “We were doing a healing ritual—acupuncture for the Earth,” said Sister Anne Marie.

And just before her departure to California, the children took part in a going away ceremony by releasing white doves into the air.

As she shares her photos, thousands of miles from her mountain home, it is obvious where Sister Anne Marie Braudis’ heart is.

Larry Rasmussen, professor of social ethics at Union Theological Seminary in New York, has visited the Sanctuary. He, too, gathered some deep memories for future reflection. Writing in an article, he said: “The Baguio mountain people and their stunning sanctuary

project ‘grows people up’ for a different world, one that assumes Earth as the comprehensive community, is the task which understands that human ethics are derivative from Earth and the ecological imperative, not vice versa.”

Readers who would like to make contributions to the deaf school can send donations to the Maryknoll Sisters, Maryknoll, NY 10545. Be sure to specify that they go to the school, said Sister Anne Marie.

Sharon Avercrombie is EARTHLIGHT’s Assistant Editor. She leads Dances of Universal Peace. For more information, call (510) 530-7026.

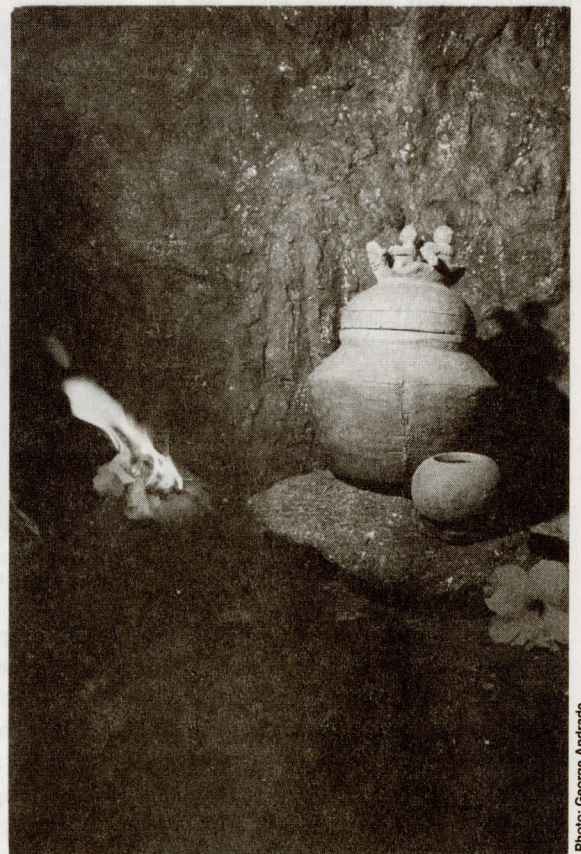


Photo: George Andrade

Pottery burial jar, created by local Philippine tribal man