

Garden is Part of Earth & Spirit Center Growth

by Glenn Rutherford, Assistant Editor

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Holly Clark of the Passionist Earth & Spirit Center, tends to the center's garden

Three-year-old Passionist Center offers courses, programs to help people of faith care for creation

By most any measure, the news can be depressing.

Oil these days is selling for more than \$130 a barrel when just a little more than a year ago, it was half that price.

The cost of gasoline, as a result, has topped \$4 a gallon locally in the last week or so. Grocery prices are increasing, too; someone has to put fuel in the truck to get that food to market.

Mother Nature seems to be rebelling against the gases and dirt that have been thrown into the air. Pollution threatens those with breathing problems, and global warming has been generally accepted as fact — if the late Admiral Richard Byrd were to visit the North Pole this summer as he did just a few decades ago, there's a good chance he wouldn't find any ice.

Polar bears are now listed as a “threatened” species and in many ways, some environmentalists say, so are humans.

Yet there are still optimists to be found. There are still people of faith who can see — and teach — ways to change course, to improve and nurture the earth and one another.

The Passionist Earth and Spirit Center is a place alive with optimism.

Led by Passionist Father Joseph Mitchell, the three-year-old center at 1924 Newburg Road is a refuge for those who want to understand what's happening and discover ways to foster positive change in themselves and in the world.

Father Mitchell is assisted by a three-person staff — associate directors Phyllis Fitzgerald and Beth Zangari, and Holly Clark, the center's most recent addition. Clark is director of the Earth and Spirit Center Garden and a new program called the Maryhurst Healing Collaborative.

The garden uses not only organic techniques but also a process called “biodynamic permaculture” gardening — a combination of time-honored techniques such as lunar planting and practices that “replenish and restore the soil without depleting it,” she explained.

On Saturdays, young women from Maryhurst visit the center to work in the garden. Maryhurst is a local agency that provides residential, in-home and community-based treatment programs to children with severe emotional disabilities.

The idea behind the gardening program is to allow the young women from Maryhurst “to be in the garden, to be a part of nature, and experience the healing, the pleasure and calm that comes from that experience,” Clark explained during a recent interview.

The garden itself is a thing of beauty, designed in the shape of both a Tibetan mandala and a native American medicine wheel. “It's a place where people can see and be part of bringing earth-centered practices into use,” Clark explained. “We're using some pioneering gardening practices and at the same time we're using old, time-less practices, too. We want it to be a compilation of the best, most sustainable ways of gardening and caring for the earth.”

The garden is part of the local “Community-Supported Agriculture” program, and Clark hopes it will become the largest urban garden in the city of Louisville within the next three years.

The vegetables produced there will be used by Maryhurst, and a percentage of the crops will be sold on weekends in front of the center's Newburg Road location.

The garden may be the most visible sign of activity at the Earth & Spirit Center, but it's only the crest of a growing wave.

The center, Father Mitchell noted, “grew out of a need to connect people of faith to caring for creation.”

“People might think that caring for the earth isn't a faith issue, a moral issue, but it is,” he said.

After heading a retreat center in Sacramento, Calif., Father Mitchell returned to Louisville four years ago and spearheaded the development of the Earth & Spirit Center.

“We saw that the Passionist community had this resource here of 22 acres, this building and this land,” he explained. “And we thought ‘What does this community need?’ There is a growing awareness, a consciousness about caring for the earth, and so we thought we could bring these things together. We thought this is what Louisville could really use.”

The center is best described, he said, as “an interfaith spirituality institute established in the conviction that earth and all of its inhabitants are sacred.”

The programs and philosophy of the Earth & Spirit Center are based, Father Mitchell said, on the writings of Passionist Father Thomas Berry, an author, cultural historian and cosmologist noted for his works on “ecospirituality.”

Father Berry is famous for proposing that an understanding of both history and the evolving universe are necessary to guide our development as individuals and as a species.

To that end, the center promotes practices that consider the earth to be a single, sacred community. The center’s activities, Father Mitchell said, are grouped in three major areas:

- Spiritual practices — classes and spiritual guidance that draw upon the teachings of Christianity as well as other spiritual traditions.
- Transformative learning opportunities — courses and studies that explore the connections between all life and all of creation.
- Community action, such as the gardening project, Community-Supported Agriculture, and other programs that emphasize the connection between Christianity and the earth.

“Our mission is to motivate, to educate religious institutions and people of faith to take an active role in building a just, beautiful and sustainable world,” Father Mitchell said.

The center now has a mailing list of about 1,100 people, and is offering courses in meditation and cosmology that, Phyllis Fitzgerald said, are growing in popularity. There have been outreach programs with local parishes, too, including Our Lady of Lourdes, St. Patrick, St. William and St. James Church in Elizabethtown, Ky., she added.

In addition to financial support from the Passionist community, the center also gets support through the cost of its courses, individual donations and grants from private sources, including the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth and the Norton Foundation.

“If our mission is to help people of faith care for creation,” Father Mitchell noted, “then we need to teach courses in voluntary simplicity — and we do. These are courses that help you understand that you can make choices for sustainable living.”

Often people become aware of the need to make fundamental changes in lifestyle and consumer practices — such things as conserving energy and resources, recycling and promoting locally-grown agricultural products.

“Sometimes people just feel overwhelmed and don’t know where to start,” Fitzgerald said. “We want them to know they can come to us and ask for our help.”

And they can ask for not just guidance but education, Clark noted. “Some of the high school students who’ve come to us are so disconnected from their environment,” she said. “You have to remember that by the time a young person completes the 12th grade, they’ve seen more commercials on television than they’ve seen instruction in a classroom.”

But there remains cause for hope, Father Mitchell said.

“There is interest in what we’re doing and it’s growing rapidly,” he added.

For additional information about the Earth & Spirit Center, or details of the classes and programs available there, call 452-2749 or visit their web site at www.earthandspiritcenter.org. They can also be reached by e-mail at earthandspirit@passionist.org.