

A Mutually Enhancing Relationship with the Natural World

A Retreat with Thomas Berry

The Thomas Berry Project
Loyola Institute for Ministry • Loyola University New Orleans

Group Retreat Guide

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Note: This retreat guide is designed for both in-person and online gatherings. There is a corresponding PowerPoint. The opening and closing prayers, use and number of readers, and the leader script are suggestions. Adjust as needed for the intended audience.

Note to retreat leader: As participants arrive, ask for three volunteer readers. Depending on the number of readers you plan to use, you may want to have handouts with the readings to distribute to the readers. For zoom retreats, you will need to call on the readers at the appropriate time.

Retreat Design

Timeline for Retreat (times are approximate)

2 minutes	Introduction to the Reflection
2	Opening Prayer
5	Introduction to the Video Clip
7	Watch video clip #1 from “The Church in the 21st Century”
10	Silent reflection and journaling using discussion questions
20	Break out into small groups to discuss
5	Large group sharing
5	Introduction to Lectio
15	Reflections on being a mutually enhancing presence
10	Silent reflection and journaling using discussion questions
20	Break into small groups to discuss
5	Large group sharing
5	Closing
4	Closing Prayer

TOTAL TIME: 115 minutes

Introduction to the Reflection (2 minutes)

The leader begins by posting the overall question to be explored, and asking participants to keep this question in mind throughout the session:

How are we being called—individually and together—to enter into a mutually enhancing relationship with the natural world, so that both the Earth and our own lives may flourish in communion with the Divine?

Note: *This question is not meant to be answered at the beginning. Individual answers to this question are meant to be explored throughout the session.*

Opening Prayer (2 minutes)

Holy One, as we enter into this time together, awaken us to the universe that you have created.

Awaken us to the wonder of the blazing stars against the midnight heaven.

Awaken us to the sounds and colors that feed our imagination.

Awaken us to the awe of the mighty forests and their mysterious underground networks of communication.

Awaken us to the understanding that our inner world is shaped by our outer world.

May we know that our sense of the Divine flows from our experience of the universe.

Help us to see.

Amen.

Introduction to the Video Clip (5 minutes)

Leader: Today's focus will be on what Thomas Berry called the Great Work of our day - moving the human community away from an attitude of commodification, of seeing the natural world simply as an object for human use, towards a stance of living in a mutually enhancing relationship with all of life.

Reader #1: The planet earth is not a collection of objects to be exploited. To use the term "natural resources" is profoundly insulting to every being on the continent. To say that every being is there primarily as a resource for the human, everything becomes production. Production becomes the norm of wellbeing for humans to the degradation of everything else. (Thomas Berry, The Church in the 21st Century Lecture)

Leader: Instead, our relationship should be one that is mutually enhancing. We get something from the universe, the planet earth, the natural world, and we give something back. A relationship of reciprocity. For Thomas Berry, there is an urgent need for the human to turn away from the devastation we are causing the natural world, but not only for the benefit of the natural world. For in his eyes, it was also about our fulfillment as human beings. It is about our taking on our proper role in the universe community, and about our connecting with the Divine.

Reader #2: The great work of the future, the spirituality of the future, is not something that is a calling for this person or that person, for people in economics or in law or medicine. It is a universal call for everybody. It is the vocation of everyone. Everyone has a vocation to move the human community from a position of devastation of the natural world to a context in which we will establish a mutually enhancing presence to the natural world. That is the basic work. That is where we find our fulfillment. (Thomas Berry, An Ecologically Sensitive Spirituality Lecture)

Leader: One of Berry's core teachings is the assertion that a devastated outer world leads to a devastated inner world. In his understanding, a devastated outer world diminishes our ability to relate not only to each other and to the world around us, but more importantly, to God.

Reader #3: The salvation of our souls is dependent on our capacity for communion with the world in which we live, because our inner world is shaped by the outer world. And that's one of the reasons why the devastation that we are bringing on our outer world is, simultaneously, a devastation of our inner world. A devastated continent will produce devastated inner world peoples. (Thomas Berry, Emergent Universe Lecture)

View Video 1 (7 minutes)

Watch video clip #1 from “The Church in the 21st Century”

Silent Reflection and Journaling (10 minutes)

Leader: We are now going to take some time for silent reflection and journaling followed by group sharing. The following questions are meant to guide this time. We will take 10 minutes of silence, after which we will move into breakout groups for 20 minutes to share.

Show the following questions on the accompanying PowerPoint. Suggest that participants pick one or two for reflection.

- Thomas Berry reminds us that “the primary manifestation of the Divine comes from the planet earth and from the universe.” What aspect of the natural world speaks most deeply to you, and how might it reveal something of the Divine presence?
- Berry speaks of “entering into this process by participating in this larger dimension of things.” In your own life, when have you felt like a true participant in Earth’s unfolding

rather than simply an observer or user? How might you deepen that sense of belonging and reciprocity?

- What would it mean for you to honor the “rights” of other beings—trees, rivers, birds, insects—as members of the sacred community?

Small Group Sharing (20 minutes)

Leader: We are now going to move into small breakout groups for 20 minutes. I invite you to share some of the insights you gained from the video and your subsequent reflection. Use the questions for guiding your discussion.

***Note**: If you are in person, suggest that participants break up into groups of 3 or 4. If you are on zoom, create groups of 3 or 4 in which to send participants.*

Large Group Sharing (5 minutes)

Leader: I invite one person from two or three groups to share an insight from their group’s discussion.

Introduction to Lectio (5 minutes)

Leader: Next, we are going to hear selections from Loyola’s Thomas Berry collection. Each serves as an insight into what living in a mutually enhancing relationship with the world around us involves. In the first section, Berry speaks of celebration and wonder. In the second section, he offers a number of things that we receive from the natural world. And in the final section, he offers a number of ways that we can give back in return.

Leader: After we read each clip, we will take a few moments of silence. I will then invite you to share a word or phrase or brief idea that resonated with you as you listened.

Lectio reflections on being a mutually enhancing presence to the natural world (15 minutes)

Celebration and Wonder

Reader #1: Which brings us back to something that is enormously important about the universe. What is the point of the universe? The only point of the universe is celebration. That is what the universe is all about. A celebration of existence, of beauty, of fecundity. A celebration of life. A celebration of flowers. The birds sing, the fish swim, the flowers blossom, the rivers flow, and the mountains rise. It is the inner purpose of delight in being, the delight in all phases of existence. ... The sense of wonder. That is what religion is. What is religion? It is a

sense of wonder and celebration. What is a spiritual life? It is a consequence of this fascination and this sense of wonder. An ecstatic sense of wonder. Children have this and so does anybody when you see a wild animal, when you see a bird, or any of the natural phenomena. The first moment is ecstatic. I wonder sometimes how we can cut down the great forests? And my view is that when you first see it and first experience it you have a kind of wonderment at the fearsomeness and majesty, but then before we can do the clear cutting, we have to kill something that is deep down within ourselves. We have to withdraw. We have to escape from that ecstasy down to something very crude. Something unworthy of us. And only then can we do the types of things that we do. (Thomas Berry, The Emergent Universe Lecture)

Leader: We will take a few moments of silence while you share a word or phrase or brief idea that resonated with you as you listened.

Note: *If you are in person, invite the participants to speak their word or phrase out loud. If you are on zoom, invite the participants to type their word or phrase into the chat box. You can then read them out loud to the group.*

Mutually enhancing relationship: What do we receive?

Reader #2: "If we lose the birds we lose our souls in a sense. We lose one of the most wonderful experiences in our imagination that gives us a sense of flight, a sense of beauty, a sense of song, and a sense of mystery." Some things that we receive from the natural world: a meeting place with the Divine, manifestations of the Divine, life, consciousness, beauty, imagination, wonder, guidance, inner strength, knowledge. (Compiled from the Loyola Thomas Berry Collection)

Leader: We will take a few moments of silence while you share a word or phrase or brief idea that resonated with you as you listened.

Mutually enhancing relationship: What do we give back?

Reader #3: "There is no ultimate purpose of the created world. It is fulfilled in itself and in its role as being a manifestation of the Divine. But how is it a manifestation of the Divine except by celebration? The experience of the universe is ecstatic. It is an experience of the Divine. Appreciating this in a reflective way is the purpose of the human. It doesn't require everyone to become a philosopher or scholar, but in a sense, it does require that we dance and enjoy existence." Some ways that we can give back to the natural world: ritual, liturgy, music, dance, writing, poetry, science, protection, reflection, healing, joy, gratitude. (Compiled from the Loyola Thomas Berry Collection)

Leader: We will take a few moments of silence while you share a word or phrase or brief idea that resonated with you as you listened.

Silent Reflection and Journaling (10 minutes)

Leader: We are again going to take some time for silent reflection and journaling followed by group sharing. The following questions are meant to guide this time. We will take 10 minutes of silence, after which we will move into breakout groups for 20 minutes to share.

Show the following questions on the accompanying PowerPoint. Suggest that participants pick one or two for reflection.

- What gifts have you received from the natural world that deepened your imagination, sense of wonder, and connection to the Divine? How does your inner life suffer when you overlook or diminish these gifts?
- What forms of gratitude, creativity, or celebration do you feel called to offer back to the Earth community?
- When was the last time you experienced an “ecstatic sense of wonder” in nature, and how did it move you? How might you let wonder and celebration become a more central part of your spiritual practice?

Small Group Sharing (20 minutes)

Leader: We are now going to move into small breakout groups for 20 minutes. I invite you to share some of the insights you gained from the video and your subsequent reflection. Use the questions for guiding your discussion.

Large Group Sharing (5 minutes)

Leader: I invite one person from two or three groups to share an insight from their group’s discussion.

Closing and Final Prayer (5 minutes)

Leader: I would like to thank you for choosing to participate and share in the discussion process. We began by posing this question: *How are we being called—individually and together—to enter into a mutually enhancing relationship with the natural world, so that both the Earth and our own inner lives may flourish in communion with the Divine?* We hope that this series of reflections and the insights you have encountered today might strength your understanding and help guide your journey in this wondrous universe.

Final Prayer

A prayer for our earth

All-powerful God, you are present in the whole universe
and in the smallest of your creatures.
You embrace with your tenderness all that exists.
Pour out upon us the power of your love,
that we may protect life and beauty.
Fill us with peace, that we may live
as brothers and sisters, harming no one.
O God of the poor,
help us to rescue the abandoned and forgotten of this earth,
so precious in your eyes.
Bring healing to our lives,
that we may protect the world and not prey on it,
that we may sow beauty, not pollution and destruction.
Touch the hearts
of those who look only for gain
at the expense of the poor and the earth.
Teach us to discover the worth of each thing,
to be filled with awe and contemplation,
to recognize that we are profoundly united
with every creature
as we journey towards your infinite light.
We thank you for being with us each day.
Encourage us, we pray, in our struggle
for justice, love and peace.

—Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'* #246.

Video Clip Transcription

The Church in the 21st Century - Lecture by Thomas Berry, February 1995

And so, however, the main idea is that the church exists in this period when there is a severe difficulty in sustaining the basic biosystems of the planet. My own proposal is that we are at the end of the Cenozoic period. We are terminating 65 million years of life expression and development on the earth. The only way in which we can go is to what I call an Ecozoic period, a period when humans will be present to the earth in a mutually enhancing manner. But to do this is not just a question of recycling, it is not a question simply of reducing our energy resources, it is not simply a matter of technical processes. This requires a profound change of mind. And what constitutes the change of mind that is required? The change of mind that is required is one simple thing: to recognize that the planet earth and the universe are primary and humans are derivative. It's a very simple thing. That's the first thing, that the planet Earth is primary and humans are a subsystem of the Earth system in every way. The Earth is our primary teacher, the Earth is a primary economic entity, it's the primary lawgiver, it's the primary revelation of the Divine. It's the primary technologist; it's the primary engineer, so to speak, because the whole planet is a kind of engineering process as well as a creative process in so many other ways. So that to understand this is something that doesn't come easy to us.

Let me say something, too, about the North American continent. When we came here to this continent, we might have come to join the great community of North America. We might have come here with the idea of being at home with the trees, being at home with the rivers, of coming to understand that we are entering into a great community of life where we would be a benefit for the community of life here—the animals, birds, insects, flowers, trees, the fish in the streams, and the mountains, and the winds, and all that. That we might somehow join this great community of life, and that we might give to that community in a certain sense a reflexive awareness of itself and enter into a new level of celebration within this continent. We might have come to appreciate the Appalachian Mountains, the Great Central Valley. We might have come to appreciate the Colorado River and to recognize its rights. We might have recognized that every being has rights. Trees have tree rights. Insects have insect rights. Birds have bird rights. And everything, everything that exists, has a right to be and a right to fill its role in the community of existence. And this community of existence which is the primary reality of things... Saint Thomas says—and he is someone who was very much concerned with this—Saint Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologica* tells us that the great community of the universe is the primary ... the great community of the universe participates in and manifests the Divine more than any single being whatsoever. He tells us again that the order of the universe is the ultimate and noblest perfection in things, the ultimate and noblest perfection in things. That's in the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, in the Second Book, chapter 46. So that the primary sacred community, the primary sacred community is not the human community; the primary sacred community is the community of the universe. The primary sacred community as regards the earth is the Earth itself, the Earth community, and we participate in that community. And the primary manifestation of the Divine comes not out of a book, but the primary manifestation

of the Divine comes from the planet Earth and from the universe. And we enter into this process by participating in this larger dimension of things.