

# CHARITY EARTH NETWORK NEWSLETTER



January 2023  
Feast of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton

Happy New Year and Feast of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton! Our first issue of the Charity Earth Network Newsletter of 2023 reminds us that the call to care for Creation, our common home, embraces both contemplation and action. Sr. Regina Bechtle explores how much creation drew Elizabeth Seton to contemplation and how a new relationship to Earth flows from our own contemplative stances. The Ecospirituality Group of the Sisters of Charity of Saint Elizabeth reports on their retreat "Boundless Charity Embraces Earth" in which the land, air, water, animals of Vermont were themselves the retreat director. Our prayer service calls us to Elizabeth as a model of embracing communion as we hear the LCWR call to investigate the

intersections of climate change, racism, and forced migration. In our Vincentian tradition, contemplation always leads to action and often flows from action. Sr. Mary Ann Garisto, one of the great pioneers in Earth consciousness in the Charity Federation, calls us to act in resistance to the threat of plastic pollution. The new net zero ministry building of the Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati, Casa del Sol, is a monument to sustainable building and also to the memory of another Federation ecology matriarch, Sr. Paula Gonzalez. May we cross the threshold of a new year with confidence in the energy of our charism. The Charity that set the universe spinning into existence 13.8 billion years ago fires our prayer and infuses out action.

*Carol*

*Cj*

*John*

*Terry*

**The Charity Earth Network is an organization of sisters and associates of the Congregations of the Sisters of Charity Federation who are interested in**

**-reflecting on ecology/the new cosmology/sustainability from the perspective of the Vincentian/Setonian charism;**

**-sharing information and resources**

**-supporting each other in our efforts to advocate for a more sustainable Earth community.**

## **Communion with Creation: The Grace of Our Moment** **Regina Bechtle, SC (New York)**

If nothing else, the COVID pandemic has brought home to us the fact that we humans are being called to **communion** – maybe in a fuller, deeper way than we ever knew the meaning of that familiar word.

Pope Francis pleads for us to stretch toward communion:

“Everything is connected. Concern for the environment thus needs to be joined to a sincere love for our fellow human beings and an unwavering commitment to resolving the problems of society. Moreover, when our hearts are authentically open to universal communion, this sense of fraternity excludes nothing and no one.” (*Laudato Si'*, #91 & 92)

The communion Pope Francis talks about sounds a lot like the time of fulfillment described by the Hebrew prophets, echoed in Jesus’ preaching and actions: a time of newness, *shalom*, right relationships between God and all that God has created.

We might think of communion as another word for the energy and passion that moved Vincent & Louise & Elizabeth Ann Seton to **build relationships** - to create communities for and with those in need, far or near. Communion invites us to **real presence** as a way of life.

We in the family of Charity know well that universal communion has everything to do with humans’ treatment of humans. Each of us could share multiple stories of connection with those whom we serve: migrants, children, mothers, young adults, students, those who are sick, imprisoned or newly released, the elderly, those suffering from food or shelter insecurity, victims of trauma or violence, those who fall between the cracks of so many broken systems. Our bonds of communion with them are deep and lasting.

But it is truly a grace of our time to recognize that our call to universal communion – the fire of Charity that impels us - extends as well to our relationship with Earth and all creation. The vision of *Laudato Si'* builds on the wisdom of indigenous people, writers, geologists and scientists, from people like you in the Charity Earth Network and the groups with whom you network, who are fluent in the language of mutual communion.

Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton, whose feast we celebrate January 4, was a woman of relationships – of communion with and real presence to people of all kinds. Elizabeth also loved and celebrated creation. For Elizabeth, “the nearer a soul is truly united to God,” the more it is attuned to “every being of his [God’s] creation.” (*Seton Collected Writings [CW]*, 2:82) She lived by the waters of New York harbor and Staten Island; she walked on the shore of Long Island Sound in New Rochelle. She observed the “mild, peaceful flow of the river”; she enjoyed “the dash of the waves” and felt the ocean’s renovating breeze,” even on her six-week sea voyages to and from Italy.

Sunsets, moonrises, clouds, rainbows, lightning storms, birds, animals – she noticed them all and wrote about them in her letters and journals. “*Who are we to praise thee – but we call on all thy creation to praise thee! the birds of the air, the inhabitants of the Earth, and the depths of the sea, the mountains and the valleys, and whatever thou hast made, to praise, to bless, to declare thy glory -*” (CW 3a, 310)

She gratefully breathed the pure mountain air of Emmitsburg and savored the peace of its woods and streams. In a mountain glade abundant with trees, flowers and birds, she taught children about the God who created them, and all things, very good. She delighted in violets and lilies of the valley, in jasmine and willow, in meadowlarks and lambs.

In her vivid descriptions of creation, Elizabeth truly seems to feel – to be in communion with - Earth’s energy. That energy even seemed to console her in difficult times. During her quarantine in Italy, the memory of a vivid spiritual experience when she was a teenager came to mind. While staying with her uncle’s family in New Rochelle, she had wandered into a meadow. Years later, she recalled how she sat on the moss under a chestnut tree, felt the warm sun, gazed at the “clear blue vault” above her and heard “the numberless sounds of Spring melody and joy.” With all her senses engaged, she knew deep peace. She felt the presence of a protecting God, channeled by God’s creation. In the Lazaretto, as she prayed by the bedside of her dying husband, she “lived all these sweet hours over again” and drew strength and hope from that time of communion. (CW 1:264)

In her day, Elizabeth knew nothing about the impact of fossil fuels on the atmosphere, or islands of plastic that choke our oceans – nothing about fertile land turning into desert and creating famine conditions for millions. Thirty or forty years ago, not many of us would have thought to include creation in an article about spirituality. Now we know that humans’ treatment of Earth – climate change, for which humans are largely responsible - is poisoning air, destroying crops, causing melting of the polar ice cap and rising of sea levels. We know that we have endangered or wiped out entire species of other forms of life created by God.

That is the grace of our moment. How do we meet it?

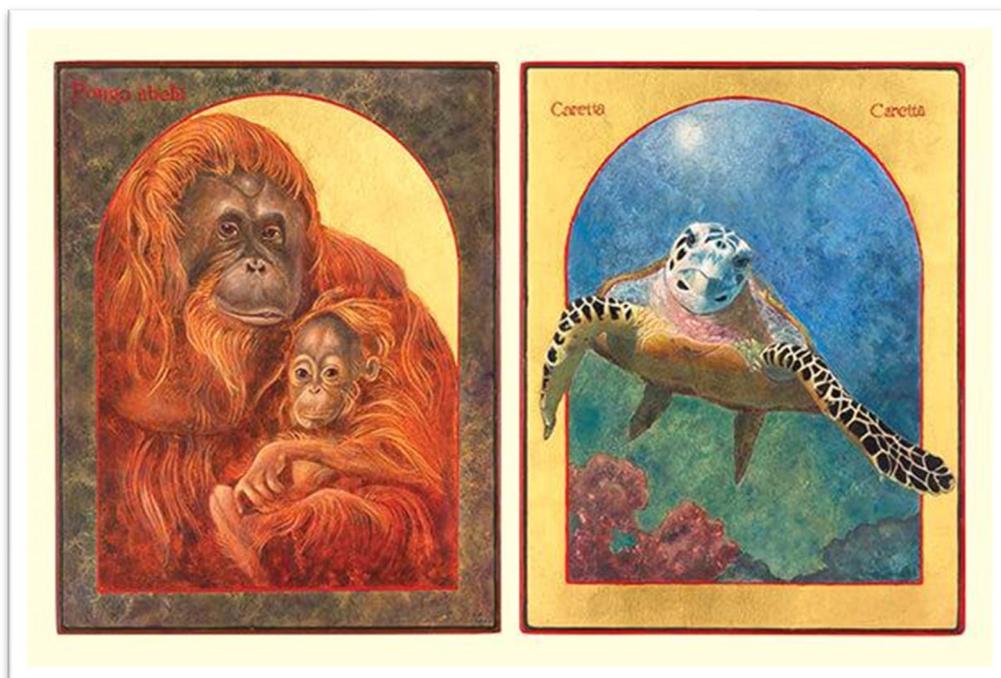
One response is to **recognize that a spirituality of communion encompasses “all our relations.”** This name that indigenous people give to all forms of life is also a prayer of oneness with and reverence for them. An article by that name in *Sojourners*, July 2022, by Andrea Couture features luminous icons – not of Christ or Mary or the saints, but of endangered species of animals. In her images, iconographer Angela Manno says that she seeks to “shed light on the holy work of loving the Earth.”

Another response to the grace of our moment is to **have the humility to let Earth teach us** - for instance, the way that trees communicate and cooperate with each other. They share nutrients

and information, and signal danger (Suzanne Simard, Robin Wall Kimmerer). One writer calls them: “architects of union in communion.”

As images from the Hubble and the Webb telescopes show us the outer reaches of the universe, we are stunned into awed silence. Often, Elizabeth Seton referred to herself as but an “atom” in comparison with the vastness of God. (British chemist John Dalton had recently proved the atom’s existence.) Today we truly can see Earth and its 8.7 million species of plants and animals as but a tiny speck in the vast scheme of creation.

When we begin to embrace the truth that we, along with all creatures made by God, depend on each other, and that we are but a tiny part of the vast mystery of creation, we enter into a new depth of our Charity virtue of **humility**. May we meet our grace, as Elizabeth Seton did, with humility, passion, and real presence in communion with all creation.



### CREATING A SENSE OF REVERENCE FOR EVERY SPECIES

Angela Manno’s "sacred icons of endangered species" shed light on the holy work of loving the earth. Sister Regina illustrated her talk with beautiful icons of engendered species by Angela Manno <https://angelamanno.com/endangered-species-collection>

## **La Casa del Sol Ministry Center, Sisters of Charity fo Cincinnati**

**Sr. Caroljean Willie, SC**



On October 2, 2022, the Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati dedicated their new La Casa del Sol Ministry Center. This new center houses a large gathering space, offices and rooms for the following ministries: Suzuki cello classes, piano classes, acupuncture center, a newcomers' office for refugee/migrant ministry, an office for the coordinator of our Justice, Peace, and Integrity of Creation work and a gathering space for smaller groups.

This new ministry center is designed to be net zero. It is highly insulated to exceed building energy code requirements and includes the following features:

- mineral wool insulation in interior walls provides thermal insulation, noise reduction, and fire protection
- closed-cell spray foam insulation in ceilings and exterior walls expands for a tight seal and also provides moisture protection
- extruded polystyrene (XPS) insulation placed on the outside of foundation walls and under concrete slab to provide continuous thermal break
- South-facing curtain wall and large windows throughout the building maximize natural light while low-emissivity (Low-E) glass reduces heat transmission and UV rays.
- Brick exterior offers a resilient and low-maintenance cladding with fire-resistance and soundproofing benefits. The breathable material helps prevent moisture issues and the thermal mass helps reduce peak heating and cooling loads.
- Standing seam metal roof utilizes recyclable materials, reduces heat absorption, and offers durability and longevity.
- Roof-mounted solar array provides a renewable source of electricity. 109 panels producing up to 410 watts each make up a total system size of 44.7 kW DC.
- Closed loop geothermal system provides renewable heating and cooling. 12 vertical wells dug to a depth of 250' are divided into 4 interior zones for flexible use.
- Energy Star appliances reduce energy consumption and high-efficiency hand dryers reduce paper waste.

The building's name is in honor of the late Sister Paula Gonzalez who was a pioneer in the field of renewable energies. The new building stands on the site of the building she constructed and lived in for many years as a model of renewable energy. The name means "The House of the Sun."

## A Celebration of One Hundred Trees

On November 19, 2022, the Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill, Greensburg, PA planted one hundred trees on their motherhouse property. The program for the Celebration of One Hundred Trees included this explanation of the importance of tree planting as well as this beautiful Native American prayer of blessing:

“The Core of the global bioplan is a simple idea. If every person on Earth planted one tree per year for the next six years, we would stop climate change in its tracks. The addition of those wonderful molecular machines, which pull carbon from our atmosphere, fix it in wood and bubble out oxygen in return, would halt the rise in global temperature and return it to a manageable level. Three hundred million years ago, trees took an environment with a toxic load of carbon dioxide and turned it into something that could sustain human life. They can do it again.” Diana Beresford-Kroeger: “To Speak for the Trees”

To Land Mother Earth and Father Sky, to the four directions, Grandfather Winds, we come here today with open hands, and open ears and open eyes, and with our feet on Mother Earth. We come here today to give you thanks and blessing, the one leg people - the tree people of the earth, who stand before us, growing tall, giving so much to us, the two leg people of the world.





**Caring for Our  
Common Home:  
Microplastics  
Sr. Mary Ann  
Garisto, SC**

The Creation's  
Transformative  
Energy Committee  
(CTEC) of SCNY has  
committed to reducing  
plastics in our lives,  
and we invite you to

do the same. We can begin by reflecting on how our habits contribute to what Pope Francis calls a “throwaway culture.” “We cannot allow our seas and oceans to be littered by endless fields of floating plastic,” said Pope Francis. When Pope Francis spoke these words, he was referring to the three large islands of plastic rubbish and microplastics that have ended up in the Pacific Ocean. Food packaging accounts for more than 40% of this waste. Many sea and land animals are suffering and dying because of microplastics. What are microplastics? They are fragments of plastic less than five millimeters in length that are difficult to recycle-reuse, and, as plastics of all sizes, do not readily break down. Like single-use plastic, less than 10% of microplastics are recycled, over 75% end up in landfills or oceans, and nearly 10% are incinerated. Microplastics are found in a variety of environments. Marine animals, fish and birds often ingest the plastics, resulting in neurological and reproductive toxicity, and work their way up through food chains. They have been detected in drinking water, food products, seafood, table salt, human tissues and organs, and human blood. Scientists are presently exploring the impact on microplastics on humans. They also have been found to be a source of air pollution. Microplastics are also produced commercially in the form of microbeads, which are found in cosmetics, synthetic clothing materials, plastic bags and plastic bottles. More information microplastics is available on the Wikipedia, Britannica or National Geographic websites. Another way to reduce and eliminate use of plastic is by becoming an aware consumer. The CTEC has sent out specific calls to action, recommending consumers to take the following steps: » Take an inventory of the food you buy and its packaging. Consider asking the store manager if there are efforts to reduce use of plastic in food packaging. » Learn how your municipality handles plastics in its recycling stream. Near the Mount, for example, tours are held at the Yonkers Material Recovery Facility (off the N.Y.S. Thruway near the Stew Leonard exit). » The Beyond Plastics website, [www.beyondplastics.org](http://www.beyondplastics.org), provides a wealth of information on the topic. The national project, based at Bennington College in Vermont, pairs environmental policy experts with college

students to build an anti-plastics movement. The site includes many studies, fact sheets, and reports. And if you haven't done so already, please consider replacing your water bottle with a stainless steel or glass bottle. According to Beyond Plastics, "one million single-use plastic bottles are bought around the world every minute and more than half-trillion plastic bottles are sold annually, but less than one-third of all plastic bottles will ever be recycled." Keep watching this space for more suggestions on how to lower your carbon footprint.

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At this link <https://vimeo.com/769618549> find the recording of *Called to God to Work on a Masterpiece: Conversations on Climate Across Divides*. St. Vincent de Paul affirms, "We have all been called by God to work on a masterpiece." In our time, this masterwork is engaging all of humanity to face the peril of global climate change. Often we are stuck and find it hard to find common ground with people of differing beliefs on climate change and the urgency to act. Sr. Caroljean Willie, SC draws on the work of Katherine Hayhoe <http://www.katharinehayhoe.com/> in helping us to reach across divides, finding common ground, and building a diverse movement of climate activists.



The Sisters of Charity of Saint Elizabeth (Convent Station, NJ) Ecospirituality Group and friends had a wonderful experience at our weekend retreat "Boundless Charity Embraces Earth," at Mercy Ecospirituality Center and Farm in Benson, VT <https://mercyecology.org/> : celebrations of the universe story through ritual and Mercy Farm's Cosmic Walk trail; sunny autumn days and the brilliant stars of rural VT nights; delicious farm to table meals; the company of sheep, chickens, and bees; deep and heartfelt sharing. We're already planning to offer a retreat next fall!



## Elizabeth Seton: Creating Communion

*(Environment for Prayer: A picture or statue of Elizabeth Seton; three candles)*

Leader: The LCWR Assembly Resolution 2022-2025 calls us to “Creating Communion at the Intersection of Racism, Forced Migration & Climate Crisis.” Sister Regina Bechtle, SC (NY) reflects that, “Communion is another word for the passion and energy of Charity.” As we celebrate the feast of Mother Seton at the beginning of 2023, in a fractured world longing for communion, we pray for her intercession as we “meet the grace” of our age as she met the grace of hers.

Reader: From The LCWR Assembly Resolution 2022-2025 “Creating Communion at the Intersection of Racism, Forced Migration & Climate Crisis”

Responding to God who loves all of creation into being, we recommit ourselves to initiating opportunities to create communion to more deeply examine the root causes of injustice. We particularly give priority to projects and actions that focus on the intersection of racism, forced migration, and the climate crisis. We recognize a sense of urgency and pledge prayer, education, action and advocacy. We will use our collective voice, resources, and influence in collaboration with others, to establish justice which reflects God’s creating love.

Opening Song: We Shall be Known by the Company We Keep

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aKhjaN72dRQ&t=4s>

We shall be known by the company we keep  
By the ones who circle round to tend these fires  
We shall be known by the ones who sow and reap  
The seeds of change, alive from deep within the earth  
It is time now, it is time now that we thrive  
It is time we lead ourselves into the well

It is time now, and what a time to be alive  
In this Great Turning we shall learn to lead in love  
In this Great Turning we shall learn to lead in love  
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Reader: Elizabeth Seton lived in a world shaped by slavery. Her father unquestionably owned an enslaved person. Perhaps more shocking is her silence. A prolific letter writer and diarist, Elizabeth makes no mention of slavery even though lower Manhattan where she grew up was the site of slave markets.

*A candle is lighted.*

Reader: We too are often blind to evils that surround us; to our own privilege, to our own complicity in structures of racism.

ALL: May we keep company with those who act to challenge racist structures in our Congregations, our Church, our world. May we circle round to tend the fire of antiracism.

Reader: Elizabeth Seton was deeply moved by the plight of immigrants who poured into New York harbor. Along with philanthropist Isabella Graham, Elizabeth Seton helped in 1797 to found the Society for the Relief of Poor Widows with Small Children, many of whom were new immigrants. She even wanted to serve as a wet nurse for immigrant children, though she was forbidden by her doctor father to do so.

*A candle is lighted.*

Reader: We rejoice in the countless ways the Company of Charity has welcomed new immigrants since our earliest days.

ALL: May we keep company with those who welcome immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. May we circle round to tend the fire of welcome and be energized to challenge structures of xenophobia and exclusion.

Reader: Elizabeth Seton lived in the early days of the industrial revolution when the world, all unknowing, would begin the dependence on fossil fuels that resulted in our current climate catastrophe. Her writings are full of keen observations of the natural world which was one of the chief places where she experienced God's presence and providence.

*A candle is lighted.*

Reader: May we love Creation as Elizabeth did so that we will work for the well-being of our kin whom we love.

ALL: May we keep company with those who love Earth and work for the flourishing of all the community of life. May we circle round to tend the fire of care for our common home.

### REFLECTION/SHARING

Sr. Regina Bechtle says that Elizabeth Seton was "relationally relentless;" a person deeply committed to forging communion. Communion means making connections. How do you experience the intersection of racism, forced migration, and the climate crisis? In what you have read, heard on the news, experienced in your own life?

Leader: May the Spirit awaken in us a sense of urgency that we will use our collective voice, resources, and influence in collaboration with others, to establish justice which reflects God's creative love. Moved by Elizabeth's relational relentlessness, by her sense of urgency, we conclude our prayer with her words:

ALL: Dear Savior, leave us not, forsake us not. We thirst for You, Fountain of Living Water. Our days pass quickly along. Soon all will be consummated for us. Into Your hands we commend our spirits, now and forever. Amen.

