

Awakening to the Sacred

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 seven 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)

5 minutes	Introduction to the Reflection
1	Opening Prayer
5	Introduction to the Theme Video Clips
5	Watch video clip #1 from “The Church in the 21 st Century”
10	Silent Reflection and Journaling
4	Watch video clip #2 from “Cosmic Liturgy”
10	Silent Reflection and Journaling
20	Small group sharing
5	Large group sharing
10	Lectio reflection
10	Large group sharing
5	Closing and Final Prayer

TOTAL TIME: 90 minutes

Introduction to the Reflection (5 minutes)

Start the program by asking everyone to relax and enter into a state of receptivity. Explain that the first short video clip (transcription just below) comes from the beginning of a talk that Thomas Berry gave at Loyola called "The Universe as Sacred Community."

What do you see? What do you see when you look up at the sky at night? When you see the blazing stars against the midnight heavens? What do you see when the dawn breaks over the eastern horizon? What do you see? What do you feel standing on the levee in the evening as the mighty Mississippi rolls on its way to the Gulf? What are your thoughts in the fading days of summer as the birds depart on their south return, or when the leaves turn brown and are blown away? What are your thoughts when you look out over the ocean in a summer day? What do you see?

In the opening paragraph of *The Human Phenomenon*, Teilhard de Chardin tells us: "One can say that a whole of life lies in seeing ... That's probably why the history of the living world can be reduced to the elaboration of ever more perfect eyes ... See or perish." This is the situation imposed on every element of the universe by the mysterious gift of existence.

Take a moment of silence followed by the leader posing the overall questions to be explored and asking participants to keep these questions in mind throughout the session:

What do you see, feel, and/or think as you look out over the world before you? Do you experience the sacred? How might awakening to the sacred impact your participation in the total Earth community?

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 (1 minute)

As we enter into this time together, we thank you, God, for this sacred earth on which we live our lives.

Awaken us to your sacred Presence in the mountains, the rivers, and all the various beings.

Help us to see the Divine in all things.

And teach us to live our lives as a sacred celebration.

Amen.

Introduction to the Theme and Video Clips (5 minutes)

Leader: Thomas Berry said: “Life is a sacred celebration. Every being participates by its existence, by being a manifestation of the Divine” (From the Institutional Context interview with Kathleen O’Gorman). What do we mean by the word “sacred”? Something is sacred when it is related to and connected to God and deserving of reverence. The sacred points to the Divine. And we participate in the sacred celebration of life by seeing, by waking to, the manifestation of the Divine in ourselves and all things and allowing that wakefulness to direct our action in the world. (Cue Reader #1)

Reader #1: [A] new sense of the universe needs to be understood. It needs to be understood as having a spiritual dimension as well as a physical dimension. That is the difficulty. The scientists have told us that the universe emerged into being in some mysterious way, but it is a simple mechanistic process that can be known by quantitative measurements and put into scientific formulas. ... The necessity is that we understand that the universe had a spiritual dimension from the beginning. In a sense, it was a minimal mode of consciousness, but every being has an inner presentation of the great mystery of existence. Anything that exists reveals the Divine. Everything that exists has a certain Divine aspect. (Thomas Berry, “The Emergent Universe”)

Leader: It is in recognizing the sacred in our daily lives and in the natural world around us that we come to live more fully in the presence of God. All of creation is Divine manifestation. We cannot fully know God without living awake within the sacred celebration of the universe community. And once we learn to experience the world as sacred, we will begin to treat the world in a different way. (Cue Reader #2)

Reader #2: God is something more than a word. It is something more than just an intuitive experience. You cannot even sustain a vital sense of who God or what God is except through creation. God didn’t create the universe to be destroyed. He didn’t create the universe to be ignored. He created the universe as a manifestation of his own grandeur and abundance and beauty and vitality and all of that, his power. It is very absurd to drift off into interior devotion as the be-all of a Christian’s life. It is like a person professing a devotion to the Divine while watching the world of the Divine be destroyed and not even objecting. (Thomas Berry, “Spirituality of Ecology Interview with Kathleen O’Gorman”)

Leader: In this video clip, Thomas Berry discusses the Western Christian traditions break with earlier understandings of the human community as being integrally related to the whole of creation. He quotes Thomas Aquinas in the *Summa Theologica*, “The whole universe together participates in and manifests the Divine more than any single being whatsoever.”

View Video 1 (5 minutes)

Watch video clip #2 from “The University 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.

- In what ways have modern scientific narratives influenced your sense of whether the universe is meaningful or merely mechanical, and where do you notice awe, reverence, or resistance arising when you encounter the living Earth through both science and direct experience?
- When you contemplate the ordered creativity of living beings—the acorn becoming an oak, the flight of birds, the rhythms of oceans and stars—what do you intuit about the presence of a unifying or animating principle, and how might acknowledging this reshape your ethical, spiritual, or ecological commitments?
- Can you think of an example when an experience in the natural world evoked a sense of inner spontaneity in you that led you to sing, dance, or create a poem or some other kind of art?

View Video 2 (4 minutes)

Watch video clip #3 from “The Cosmic Liturgy”

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.

- Berry names three attributes of the sacred: wonder, beauty, and intimacy. Can you name something in your daily life with any or all of these attributes, particularly something you might not have previously viewed as sacred? How could this new understanding of the sacred lead you to view the world differently?
- Reflect on the idea of the Earth saying to you, “Don’t use me in the sense of devastating the better things I have to give you. I have better things to give you. I have love, I have beauty, I have wonder.” What gifts have you received from the natural world? What comes to mind? In what ways might you be using the Earth?

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: Invite one person from two or three groups to share an insight from their group's discussion.

Lectio reflection on: What does the North American Continent have to teach us? A reading from a Thomas Berry interview with Kathleen O’Gorman (10 minutes)

Leader: In a wide-ranging interview between Dr. Kathleen O’Gorman and Thomas Berry, they discuss the beauty and the sacredness of the North American continent. Berry speaks to the point that humans are not a separate sacred community apart from the universe community. He says, “The primary sacred community is the whole universe. In the same way, the planet Earth is the sacred community that we are more intimate with and, in a corresponding way, each territory of the North American continent is a single sacred community that we become members of. And not to have this sense of the sacred is a radical deficiency in our religious understanding.” Kathleen asks him what it would look like if we lived in this vision of the sacredness of our continent. He replied, “We would take care of it. We would live in intimate association with it and enjoy its beauty. We would not devastate it. We would not soil it. We would not waste it. We would not poison the air and poison the water.” Given that something that is sacred in some way points us to God, Kathleen entered into the following dialogue with Thomas, exploring in what ways he felt the North American continent pointed us towards the Divine. The Leader will read the questions that Kathleen asked him, and each reader will read one of his responses.

Leader: *What is the North American continent trying to teach us?*

Reader #3: The North American continent is trying to teach us a very simple thing. That life is a celebration. That is what we don’t get. Life is a sacred celebration. With the celebration, every being contributes by its existence and by its interrelation with the different members of this community. And in the end, by the exaltation of being manifestations of the divine, by the different modes of existence that we have. Existence, there is no purpose for existence except celebration. That is why the universe itself is the primary liturgy.

Leader: *What do the forests celebrate?*

Reader #4: They celebrate existence and their beauty and fertility. And in their renewal, the deciduous trees, the dying and rebirth. That is the basic liturgy of the universe. And we participate in that with our song, with our poetry, and with being a manifestation of the wonder of things.

Leader: *What do the flowers celebrate?*

Reader #5: They celebrate the color and fragrance and the abundance and grandeur of existence in that delicacy and that wonder of that attractiveness. So that flowers are kind of an ecstatic expression of beauty. That is why we give flowers to people on certain occasions. To bring to them a sense of admiration, to bring to them a sense of beauty, and it is in this context that we become human.

Leader: *What about the mountains?*

Reader #6: The mountains have the grandeur. The mountains declare the glory off the Divine. Each thing has its own wonder. It is the power and impact and awesomeness of the mountain that brings us some sense of the awesomeness of the source whence they came.

Reader #7: We have the mountains, we have the sea, the vastness and power and surging life of the sea. All these things are places and phenomenon that we instinctively go to for understanding and excitement, for healing, and for the abundance of life, like the soil, the soil produces our food, the sweetness of our food, the nourishing qualities of our food. The air we breathe. All these things constitute a sacred manifestation in themselves and in the relationships with everything else. So the whole of life, the whole of existence exists in the capacity for presence of things to each other. That is why we have eyes to see. Why we have ears to hear. We have eyes to see that the flowers are beautiful. There is something that happens that is of inestimable importance. That is what it is to be alive.

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.*

Large Group Sharing (10 minutes)

Leader: Invite two or three people to share an insight from the reading.

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 these questions: *What do you see, feel, and/or think as you look out over the world before you? Do you experience the sacred? How might awakening to the sacred*

impact your participation in the total Earth community? 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 Transcriptions

Video #2: "The University in the 21st Century" by Thomas Berry, February 1995

Historically, the break with this tradition took place at the time of the Great Plague that struck Europe from 1347-1349. This was a traumatic moment for the western world. Apparently a third of the people died. Since the survivors had no understanding of germs, they could only conclude that the world had grown wicked and God was punishing the world. In this situation, the best thing to do was to escape out of the world through spiritual intensity and redemption experience. The only true value was in the spiritual order. But we took with us when we died our virtues. The intensity of spiritual concerns that originated at this time expressed itself in the Dance of Death. The arts oriented the art of dying and morality plays of the 14th throughout the 15th centuries. This led on to other intense devotional movements to culminate in the Puritanism and Jansenism of the 16th and 17th centuries. This deep aversion to the natural world has profoundly conditioned the Western society ever since.

A definitive stage in this development came from René Descartes in the early 17th century. In a very real sense, he de-souled the world with his division of reality between mind and extension. In this perspective, the nonhuman world was seen simply as mechanism. Worse, however, mechanism could be—and even must be—exploited for human benefit. For six centuries, from the Great Plague and over three centuries from the time of Descartes, this aversion of the human from any intimacy with the natural world has increased. Scientists have insisted with ever greater vehemence that the universe can only be understood as the random action of minute particles with neither direction nor meaning. That we should have resisted such an interpretation given by scientists of their own discoveries is quite proper; that we should have permitted scientists to evoke in us a deep suspicion of the natural world is a matter of regret. We should have been able to provide our own interpretation of the scientific discoveries. It should have been obvious to us that our empirical inquiry into the structure and functioning of the universe was revealing a magnificent world beyond anything that we could have thought or dreamed. Any reasonable response would be admiration and awe, and even a certain foreboding at the deep mysteries presented in such an overwhelming reality. We might even consider that the emergent universe in the sequence of its unfolding is providing us with a new revelatory experience of whatever be the origin from which it emerges. For this experience, we need neither telescope nor scientific analysis. Yet, with these instruments of intimacy with the universe, we have a new understanding of the sequence of transformations through which the evolutionary process has passed in becoming what we observe in the present.

If this were simply some naïve experience had by the uninformed, it would not have resulted in such intellectual insight, such spiritual exultation, such exalted religious ritual, or in the immense volume of song and poetry and literature and dance that humans have produced. Few indeed, it seems, are those whose vision of the stars, of the oceans, of the song and flight of birds, or the mating rituals of the various life form does not evoke some sense of an inner spontaneity, a guiding principle, a consciousness, a trans-material presence manifested throughout the material embodiment, an ordering principle observed in any living being that enables the complexity of the DNA and the genetic process to function in some coherent

fashion. No sense faculty can experience it directly, and no equation can be written for it, can be written to express it. Our immediate perception tells us that there is a unifying principle in the acorn that enabled the complex components of the genetic coding of the oak tree to function as a unity, to send down roots, raise the trunk, extend the branches, and put forth leaves and fashion its seeds. Then nourish all of this by drawing up tons of water and minerals from the earth and distributing it throughout the entire life system.

That such a vast complexity of functioning should be without some unifying principle, known traditionally as the soul of the organism, should be beyond the acceptance.

Video #3: "Cosmic Liturgy" by Thomas Berry, September 2000

...only when we begin to think of the emergent universe as a comprehensive realm of the sacred. Right now, it's the world of the sacred, it's the world of the profane, it's a world of use, it's a world of natural resources. It's not the world of the sacred. It's not the world of what I describe. What are the three attributes of the sacred? Wonder, beauty, intimacy. So that until the human community and the planet Earth, but particularly the planet Earth, takes on sacred dimensions, we will forever destroy it. And in the 21st century, I think that is one of the major confrontations that has to be made between the psychic or the spirit dimension of the human and the Earth's relationship, so that we can withdraw from considering the planet Earth simply as natural resource there for use. Right now, the planet Earth is seen as something there for human use, but if we consider it there for human use, the Earth can tell us what individuals sometimes tell each other: "You used me. You used me." What does that mean? That means that you, that while I am willing to care for you, to be devoted to you, to heal you, to clothe you, and so forth, I am willing to do all that, but don't use me in the sense of devastating the better things that I have to give you. I have better things to give you. I have love, I have beauty, I have wonder, I have all those intimacies that come with humans in their relationships with each other. I will give you flowers, I will give you gifts, I will give you just wonderful things, but the main thing I give you is presence. I give you my presence.

And as soon as we begin to exploit another person, of course, we are in trouble, but it's also as regards the planet Earth, the same thing. The planet Earth tells us: "I will give you wonderful gifts. I will make the Divine present to you, only don't look at me as natural resources to be exploited, to be used." Whereas in our economics at the present time, if a thing is not used it's considered wasted.

And so, there is a great need to revere the world we live in because it's only one world. It's not two. It's not a human community and a community of outside the human. The Earth is a single community. It's participated in differently, but there are not two communities.