

***From Adam and Eve to the Cross and Beyond
(including a stop with the goddess and on to the new cosmology)***

a review by Rosemarie Pace, Coordinator of Pax Christi New York State

This intriguing title was the theme of Pax Christi Metro New York's one-day hybrid retreat (in-person and on-line) led by Mary Anne Muller on April 15th, 2023 at St. Francis of Assisi's Parish House in New York City. Mary Anne Muller is a long-time member of Pax Christi, a staunch peace activist, and an adjunct theology professor at St. John's University in Jamaica, NY. She is also a student of scripture, its roots in various philosophies and mythologies of ancient cultures, and of the new cosmology. All three played an important part in her presentations.

Mary Anne's morning session, "Traveling Back in Time," began with readings of both creation stories in the book of Genesis, emphasizing and contrasting key points in each.

In the first creation story, for example, Mary Anne noted that God created everything and everything is recognized as good. Male and female are equal. Nothing is bad. BUT she also raised questions: How is this story taught? How true is it? Scientifically, it is inaccurate. And what does "dominion" mean? How do we interpret it? She even asked, "Does God really need rest?"



In the second creation story, Mary Anne spoke of how God creates man first and draws woman from an incidental part of him, seemingly an afterthought. After eating from the Tree of Knowledge, Adam and Eve become aware and ashamed specifically of sex. Of such original sin is conceived, a sin God refuses to forgive *forever* with one caveat: God will send a son to be tortured and executed, condoning redemptive violence! In addition, the snake becomes evil, woman is inferior, and baptism is necessary to erase original sin. What happened to the goodness of all creation? What happened to a loving God?

After addressing the familiar, Mary Anne introduced us to readings from some of the myths of such ancient cultures as those of Egypt and Greece where the greatest deity was a goddess. Woman was respected as sacred, largely as a celebration of her sex and reproductive power. Societies were predominantly matriarchal. The fig tree was prominent in these myths, and to eat of its fruit was to eat the body and blood of the goddess. The snake was also an important—and positive—part of the goddess myth.

There are many comparable pieces to these various creation stories, but Judeo-Christian myths took a turn with them that reverses the meanings and values they convey. Matriarchy became patriarchy. Good became evil. Sex became dirty. A loving God became punitive and violent.

Raising these provocative ideas, Mary Anne broke attendees into small groups to answer the question, what to throw out from our own beliefs.

While one group preferred to adapt, not throw out, the rest abounded in suggestions from deleting the entire second creation story to eliminating dominion, patriarchy, and celibacy. Regarding the latter, two reasons for eliminating it were revealed. First, celibacy was not an original requirement of clergy, but was established for financial reasons. Second,



reinforcing the idea that sex is ungodly, priests, who could still be married, were to abstain from sex the night before presiding at Mass, which initially was celebrated only on Sundays. When daily Mass became the norm, sex could no longer be allowed at all for clergy. The result: celibacy, not for religious reasons, but very secular ones. Other responses to the question of what to throw out included a call to eliminate the idea that we're always right and to recognize that things are not always the way we thought they were. There were

also recommendations not of what to throw out, but what to do, for example: Educate about history. Stop using the Old Testament to justify sexism and violence. And recognize that religion is evolving; the current state of religion is crumbling.

Mary Anne's afternoon session was titled, "The Great Leap Forward." In it, she emphasized that the God we created is too small. Whether we think of God as male or female does not matter; God has no sex. We should choose whatever is most comfortable for each of us. What does matter is where we find God and how we relate to God.

One popular place to find God is in nature, in its diverse colors, its abundance, and its generosity. Our role in it—and beyond—is to be cooperators, not competitors. We must shed our religious arrogance and be community. Community is key for humans and *all* life. We need to move from being anthropocentric to being ecocentric. God is within us and we in God. We are all one. We are the energy of God. Our theology must be a theology of human fulfillment for we are the embodied presence, the incarnation—along with all the Earth—of God.

So what are we to do? Mary Anne offered three options:

- 1) Refuse to do anything.
- 2) Abandon the faith we were given.
- 3) Accept new ideas, keep some of the old, incorporate, adapt, be open and receptive.

With that, again Mary Anne broke attendees into small groups with a question, this time not what to throw out, but what to keep. And the answers flowed:

The primacy of conscience

Community, a sense of gathering
Inclusivity, universality
Doing what nourishes, praying what we really mean
House churches, liturgies without ordained clergy
Parishes of choice
Scripture as history with education to understand it, homilies that teach
A liturgical sense enriched by ritual
God's love, Jesus's teachings, the Beatitudes, Catholic Social Teaching
Whatever gets you close to Christ, e.g. nature
Pax Christi

And not only did some express these many things to keep, but they added a couple more aspirations: women clergy, along with the men, and a return to the early Church.

Ultimately, Mary Anne may have offered the best summary in her wrap-up. She shared a message she had extended many times before: Expand your heart. Expand your mind.

To delve further into some of what Mary Anne presented, you might want to read *When God Was a Woman* by Merlin Stone, *Creation and the Cross* by Sr. Elizabeth Johnson, and books by Fr. Diarmuid O'Murchu.

All told, this was a very stimulating, thought-provoking, challenging retreat, and all who attended were grateful for the experience.

