



# nova notes

NOVA Catholic Community

February 2011

## Chair Notes...

The weather has been so terribly cold the past several days, it seems as if even the squirrels and sparrows are reluctant to spend much time out of their nests. Can you imagine finding comfort huddled these wintry days among a pile of sticks and leaves, tucked high up in the crook of a naked tree and swaying in the wind? I can't either. Thank heavens, that's not what the Gospel asks us to do.

What we have been asked, this past month, is to become holy, to become followers of Jesus, and "fishers of people." Holy? Well, maybe the squirrels have it pretty easy after all, trying to stay warm in a pile of sticks and leaves.

Of course, our readings didn't mention freezing weather or staying warm in difficult circumstances, but the term *difficult circumstances* reminds me of Father Jorge's recent homily. He pointed out that, as a Galilean, Jesus belonged to people who were geographically and culturally on the margin, people who lived in difficult circumstances. Jesus lived and grew up among them, and his years of public ministry were spent healing and preaching to them. Jorge reminded us that if we are followers of Jesus, we are called to the margins of society as well. Called to serve and minister and heal as best we can. And we are also called to be living on the margin in some identifiable way.

Perhaps in these angry and unpredictable times, no one needs to be reminded that folks who dedicate themselves to serving those on the margins of society don't always feel warm and safe and comfortable. The comfort is elsewhere; the rewards and profits and powerful constituencies aren't found on the margins. In that way, not much has changed since Jesus' time.

Polls may show that unemployment and health care are the most important issues for the public, but many of our leaders choose to focus on balancing the budget instead. And instead of balancing it with a combination of raising income (i.e. taxes) and cutting expenses, they propose simply to cut government services without regard for its effect on people, especially people on the margin. Especially people who rely on Medicare, Social Security, Medicaid, Legal Aid, housing subsidies, or Head Start. Not to mention agencies that protect our food and water from contamination, inspect our bridges, protect the arts, and teach our children.

So it's pretty clear today where Jesus would lead us. It's pretty clear with whom we need to stand, for whom we need to advocate. Need renewed energy to do this? Talk with the folks involved in Nova's Peace and Social Justice programs. Inevitably, being on the margin feels like being up a tree sometimes—like those squirrels, cold and lonely and uncomfortable, but we're not alone. Jesus promised.

And so together, we carry on, heading into the month of Valentines and Presidents, Punxsutawney Phil, Chinese New Year, and the next NOVA General Meeting. Please circle February 26 on your calendars. We will meet at 7:00 p.m. in the Barrett's social room, and we have a full and lively agenda. (See the announcement inside.) There are still some tickets left for the Men Who Cook extravaganza in March, and it sounds like the Tables of Six project is off to a great start. No, it's not so cold and lonely after all!

~ Teddi, Co-chair

## February Birthdays

NOVA Message Line (703) 852-7907

Chairpersons	Tom Clarkson Teddi Ahrens
Treasurer	Joe Formoso
Coordinator, Community Life	Cece Michelotti
Liturgy Coordinator	Gloria Mog
Padre Cadre Coordinator	John Mooney
Music Coordinator	Victoria Robinson
Peace and Justice Coordinators	Dianne Carroll Marie Keefe
Christ House Coordinator	Kopp Michelotti
Facilities	Glen Passin
Newsletter Editor	Judy Christofferson

The NOVA Catholic Community invites you to celebrate the Eucharistic liturgy with us every Sunday in Arlington, Virginia.

**Note:** Our Liturgy is usually celebrated at Kenmore Middle School, Arlington Blvd. and Carlin Springs Road, Arlington, VA. Beginning Memorial Day weekend up to our Fall Retreat weekend in September, we celebrate at Lacey Woods Park, George Mason Drive near Washington Blvd., unless otherwise noted.

Liturgies at Kenmore begin at 10:15 a.m.  
Gather at 10:00 a.m.  
Liturgies at Lacey Woods begin at 9:30 a.m.  
Gather at 9:15 am

Call the Message Line (above) or check the NOVA website for the latest information.

2	Bonnie Lowery
11	Charlie Boyne Ray Kemp
12	Monica Rosenberg
15	Amy Kyleen Lute Justin Mog
19	Josh White
20	Linda Rosenberg
24	Amy Bailey
27	Catherine Schmidt
28	Mary Grace

**NOTE:** Mike Marron's birthday, January 31, was inadvertently omitted last month. Belated best wishes to Mike.

*Please send Judy Christofferson your birthday if you would like it to appear here (month/day only).*

### NOVA is praying for. . .

**Eve Birch**, who is looking for a home and items to provide temporary housing for the homeless.

**Judy Christofferson**, who broke her ankle in a fall.

**Sonja Donahue**, who appreciates a card, a call or a visit.

**Jody Furlong**, who would also appreciate a phone call or note.

Remember these and any other NOVA members and their friends and family who need our prayers.

**February Newsletter Deadline:  
Monday, February 21**

## Liturgies: Cycle A

Inclusive Readings and Music Selections are available in the new NOVA Yahoo Group Files. Please give all music selections to the Music Liaison the Sunday before your liturgy and print 65 copies of the liturgy program. Liturgies at Kenmore begin at 10:15 a.m. and at 9:30 at Lacey Woods Park.

### February Music Liaison Barbara Formoso

#### February 6 – 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

Gerry Stockhauser, SJ – Anne Passin

Isaiah 58: 7-10

Psalms 112

1 Corinthians 2:1-5

Matthew 5:13-16

#### February 13 – 6<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

John Haughey, SJ – Cece and Kopp Michelotti

Sirach 15:15-20

Psalms 119

1 Corinthians 2:6-10

Matthew 5:17-37

#### February 20 – 7<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

Quinn Conners, O.Carm. – Goldschmidts

Leviticus 19:102, 17-18

Psalms 103

1 Corinthians 3:16-23

Matthew 5:38-48

#### February 27 – 8<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

Jim Hug, SJ – Judy and Clyde Christofferson

Isaiah 49:14-15

Psalms 62

1 Corinthians 4:1-5

Matthew 6:24-34

### March Music Liaison Tim White

#### March 6 – 9<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

Joe Nangle, OFM – Christies and O'Tooles

Deuteronomy 11:18, 26-28, 32

Psalms 31

Romans 3:21-25, 28

Matthew 7:21-27

#### March 9 – Ash Wednesday

7:30 p.m. – Home of John & Marlene Tarrant

#### March 13 – 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Lent

Gerry Stockhauser, SJ – Barbara and Joe Formoso

Genesis 2:7-9; 3:1-7

Psalms 51

Romans 5:12-19

Matthew 4: 1-11

#### March 20 – 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Lent

Dan Madigan, SJ – David and Gloria Mog

Genesis 12:1-4a

Psalms 33

2 Timothy 1:8-10

Matthew 17:1-9

#### March 27 – 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Lent

Ray Kemp - Walt Landry

Exodus 17:3-7

Psalms 95

Romans 5:1-2, 5-8

John 4:5-42

## Lenten Planning Meeting

There will be a brunch at Gloria and David Mog's home on **Sunday, February 27**, right after the liturgy, to plan for the Lenten season. All Sunday planners as well as music and environmental coordinators and anyone interested in helping out with Lent are invited to attend. Please let Gloria Mog know if you are able to come.

## UPCOMING EVENTS

### NOVA General Meeting

**When: Saturday, February 26 at 7:00 p.m.**

**Where: The Barrett's** (building social hall)  
200 North Maple Ave, Falls Church

#### Agenda and Presenters:

- Review of Nova's new Co-Chair Selection Process (Gloria Mog)
- Report from the "Youth/Where Are They Going?" – TBD
- Survey Report from the Space Explorers Committee about relocating (John Tarrant)
- Peace and Justice Committee (Dianne Carroll and Marie Keefe)
- Retreat Location (Jeanne Clarkson)

**Please bring snacks to share.**

### Important Opportunity

You can keep the momentum going, making real gains that directly touch the lives of those among us in Northern Virginia who seek access to medical/dental care, affordable housing, and immigration reform. **Plan to participate in the upcoming VOICE training, Monday, February 28th, 7:00-9:30 PM at Temple Beth El, 3830 Seminary Road, Alexandria, VA 22304** (Just off of I-395 on Seminary Road.). Join with members of other congregations, synagogues, mosques to learn how relational organizing works to make a real difference for social justice in today's climate. NOVA supports VOICE (Virginians Organized for Interfaith Community Engagement) through its annual peace and social justice budget. But our commitment to VOICE goes beyond financial contribution; it needs each of us doing the hard work necessary to bring about much needed changes. Hope to see at least 5 members of the NOVA Community there. For further information, please contact John or Nancy Veldhuis, (703) 370-5070.

### The 5<sup>th</sup> Annual Peace Symposium

#### *Hope for the Middle East: Defending Religious Liberty*



With keynote speaker

**Drew Christiansen, S.J.**  
Editor in Chief of *America*

**Saturday, February 12, 10:00 a.m.-1:00p.m.**  
Registration and coffee at 9:30am

Refreshments provided. - All are welcome.

St. Charles Borromeo Catholic Church, 3304 N.  
Washington Blvd., Arlington, VA 22203  
For more information, contact Marisa Vertrees,  
703-527-5500, Ext. 126,  
[mvertrees@stcharleschurch.org](mailto:mvertrees@stcharleschurch.org)

### NOVA 2011 Retreat

#### For your term planning:

NOVA's 2011 retreat at Shrine Mont will be on September 16, 17, and 18. Mark your calendars!

#### PICTURES FOR THE FEBRUARY NEWSLETTER

For pictures of January liturgies please link directly to the following:

**[NOVA January 2011 Photos](#)**

## SOCIAL ACTION PROJECTS

### Gunston Volunteers Needed

NOVA volunteers distribute bags of non-perishable food, cereal provided by the Community, and perishable items such as eggs, milk, and meat that are picked up at the Arlington Food Assistance Center warehouse on the night of distribution. Produce items are picked up every other week by Eric Carroll at the produce markets downtown (and funded by the NOVA Peace and Justice budget). The distribution takes place at the Gunston Middle School Recreation Center in Arlington. Many volunteers have been active in this project for a lot of years. Every Thursday there is a seasoned volunteer, so this is your chance to try out your skills. Having someone who speaks Spanish is a real plus for each of the teams. If you are interested in being a volunteer, email Dianne Carroll at: [diacarroll@comcast.net](mailto:diacarroll@comcast.net) or call her at 703-536-2616.

### February Gunston Schedule:

**February 3:** Ted/Carolyn Miller, Mike/Betsy Marron  
**February 10:** Eric (**volunteer needed**)  
**February 17:** Tim/Jerry, Cathy G.  
**February 24:** Glen/Syd

### Peace and Social Justice Update

The committee convened to look ahead and set a course for this year. We feel it is important for the community to discuss all peace and social justice activities and funding in light of the new approaches NOVA has undertaken this year. Since our grand experiment includes the Men Who Cook gala on March 6, we will wait until the end of March to have a comprehensive meeting. At the February 22 general meeting we will devote time to updating everyone and gather questions to form the backbone of the March meeting.

Meanwhile most of the project liaisons have given brief oral presentations and the remainder will do so in the next month.

Our thanks to the coordinators for all their efforts.  
~The Peace and Social Justice Committee

### February Christ House Dinner

On **Monday, February 21**, NOVA will prepare and serve meatloaf and scalloped potatoes to the hungry clients at Christ House. Please mark your calendars to **remember to bring your meatloaves and potatoes to the liturgy on February 20**. Alternatively, you may drop them off at the Michelotti's anytime on Sunday or up till 1:00 p.m. on Monday the 21st. Just leave them in the coolers on the front porch at 6325 19<sup>th</sup> Street N., Arlington.

If you'd like to get involved in the kitchen, please call or e-mail Kopp Michelotti (703-241-0789, [koppmich@yahoo.com](mailto:koppmich@yahoo.com)) or Ken Chaison (301-571-8180, [kenchaison@yahoo.com](mailto:kenchaison@yahoo.com)). We generally start food prep around 4:00 p.m. Thanks for all you do!

NOVA's Christ House dates for all of 2011:

February 21  
April 18  
June 20  
August 15  
October 17  
December 19

~Kopp Michelotti

### Kudos to PAX!

Many, many thanks to the PAX community for their generous support of the Nicaraguan Micro-loan Project. Their Social Needs Disbursement Committee chose to donate \$1,000 to our efforts this year in partnership with John XXIII Institute to help Nicaraguan women with micro-loans for equipment needed to start a business once they have successfully completed training. Such thoughtful and generous solidarity from a sister IEC!

Special thanks go to Marian Klymkowsky who proposed our project to them. ~Dianne Carroll

**NOTE:** On the following page, is an appeal for help from Mike Schultheis, S.J., who has celebrated and attended NOVA liturgies in the past. He is currently Vice-Chancellor of the Catholic University of Sudan.

Dear Families and Friends of NOVA,

**My reason for writing is in one sense an appeal to you - NOVA – for help.** From my infrequent letters, you may know that I am the V-C of the Catholic University of Sudan. The Sudan Catholic Bishops' Conference decided in July 2007 to establish a Catholic University as a national institution and requested the Oregon Province of the Jesuits to assign me to the task of coordinating its establishment. Ghana was ice-cream dessert in comparison; Mozambique was also a difficult row but my role was lower on the pecking order and Sudan is much more complicated. With that, we have moved it forward. In Juba, the principal city of Southern Sudan, we are into the third year of the Faculty of Arts and Social Science with some 200 students – first program here is Economics and Business Administration (the country needs competent managers!). In Wau, about 350 miles northwest of Juba and a State capital, we are into the second year of the Faculty of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences with 50 students (yes, the country needs competent agriculturalists/farmers who also are knowledgeable about environmental issues). We plan, perhaps this next year, to begin a Faculty of Engineering Sciences, Civil and Mineral Engineering (yes, the country also needs builders and engineers who have sufficient background in geophysics so that they later can study petroleum engineering). Students pay tuition fees of approximately US \$800 (in local currency, 2,000 Sudanese pounds). By next year, my hope is that we will be able to cover operational costs from tuition fees. However, for developing the facilities in both Juba and in Wau, we need additional support.

**My request is in part a request for advice ... If you/Nova would know of some family foundations or organizations that might look kindly on a request for assistance – grants of US \$ 5,000-\$10,000** (More or even less would be very helpful!), please let me know. In Juba the State Governor has allocated CU of S a plot of about 6 acres for the permanent site and construction of what will be the central administration unit combined with Library/ITC . We have approached ASHA (American Schools and Hospitals Abroad) for support and are hopeful that ASHA will fund this in two phases. In the short term we intend to build a “provisional facility” of about five classrooms with a computer lab and office space – if ASHA approves the grant, the “provisional facility” will become a special learning center, probably for training of teachers. I think that we can do this for about \$175,000 (I have nearly \$100,000 on the income stream and need an assist with the balance).

In Wau, the State Governor has allocated the faculty a plot of about 8 acres for a University Farm near the campus and along the Jur River. My hope was for a larger area so that the Faculty could engage students on a regular basis in the cultivation of horticultural crops. Since the area is not large enough for that, the Faculty will develop it as a nursery for development and dissemination of improved seeds of traditional and area crops and a Center for Agricultural Research. Cornell University is involved in planning this and Virginia Tech is partnering with CU of S, VSU and University of Juba on a food security project in Southern Sudan (focus on teaching, research and extension/outreach). USAID is providing initial funding, but over a longer time horizon and mainly for training personnel, with very little assistance for developing infrastructure, which is a priority for me at this time. **I am especially in need of funds to purchase laboratory equipment for students in the agricultural sciences and the early development of the University Farm – about \$10,000 for the Laboratory Equipment and perhaps twice that amount to spark the early work on the University Farm.**

Perhaps enough said – and this along to you with the hope that with the wisdom and linkages of the NOVA Community, you might be able to interest (or put me in contact with) some “family foundations” or organizations that would have a window for Sudan and such initiatives. As I often say, “the baby is born” ... and the challenge is to nourish it and care for it ...surely it has promise ... If you wish additional information, give me a word and I will reply directly. And this, with many blessings and best wishes, to each and all of you ... and families extended!

Fr. Mike Schultheis, S.J  
Vice-Chancellor, Catholic University of Sudan  
P.O. Box 257, Juba (CES), Sudan  
Tel: Mob 249 (0) 126 740 698

The following letter from Valerie Dixon, provides an update, *“Prison Ministry Report on Chrysalis and Faith Behind Bars 2010.”* Her work is supported by the Community.

Dear Nova Friends,

In this report I want to bring you up to date on two primary areas of prison ministry: Work “inside” with the Chrysalis program at York Correctional Institution in Niantic, CT, and work “outside” with the Diocesan Prison Ministry Committee, Faith Behind Bars.

This January the Chrysalis Community begins its ninth year, and I begin my eighth year as Coordinator. Chrysalis continues to develop and change with the changing needs of the women who participate and the changing policies of the Connecticut Department of Correction. Since its creation in 2003 by the Rev. Dr. Laurie Etter, Chrysalis has provided a safe, supportive environment for spiritual growth and transformation for over 500 women on the grounds of the York Correctional Institution. The goal of this interfaith living unit is to help women deepen their personal faith, develop tools for spiritual and emotional healing, and use these tools to address their personal life issues. To date over 200 women have graduated from the 120 hour core curriculum. Of these graduates, about 180 have been released and fewer than 12% have returned to prison on new charges, a figure far below the national average of 45-65%.

The Chrysalis program began with all participants in one group under the direction of Rev. Etter. Several years ago it expanded to include four levels, each with its distinct curriculum. However, in the last year we have had to make some changes in response to the changing situation at the prison and among the Chrysalis volunteer staff. In 2010, the State of Connecticut mandated a 25% reduction in the prison budget that has resulted in shorter sentences, early release for many inmates, and continued cuts in staff and programs. The overall population at York is down by almost 400 women since 2008. There are fewer applicants for Chrysalis, and those who join often cannot complete the full 6-8 month curriculum. Also, the Coordinator of our Graduate Program, who also taught the Introductory Level 1 group, had to resign for health reasons. At this time we are continuing with three levels of programming: Level 1, now taught by the Rev. Charlotte White, a Department of Corrections Chaplain who also serves as administrator for Chrysalis; Level 2, the 120-hour core curriculum that I teach for 15-20 women, down from 30-35 several years ago – a much more manageable size; Levels 3 and 4 have been combined into a Graduate Support Group that is led by a new volunteer to whom we want to pay a small stipend if we can find funding. Making these changes was challenging for all of us, but at this point all three levels seem to be running smoothly.

Besides these three levels of programming, we continue with the Prayer Partners, women from local faith communities who come in one night a week and work one-on-one with those in Chrysalis. Thanks to other capable, faithful volunteers we are also able to offer first-quality enrichment activities that include Art, Poetry, and Yoga. Finally, we have been greatly blessed in the last year by the presence of a volunteer who is both a spiritual director and a sexual abuse/domestic violence counselor. She comes two afternoons a week and works one on one with the women who have suffered with these traumatic issues, which includes most of those in the program. She is able to help them open up these experiences, often for the first time, see the links between abuse and addiction, and she points them in directions of healing while they are in prison and when they are released.

As you can see, the size and shape of Chrysalis have changed this year, but my sense is that the quality of the program remains high. Because we often have participants for a shorter time, we are working to simplify the spiritual tools that we teach and including more re-entry skills. We are also more grateful than ever for the volunteers and the financial support that we receive. Over the last eight years we have trusted that “what God wants, God will pay for.” In these difficult economic times, donations to all charitable organizations are down, as you know. A Sacred Place, the “umbrella 501c3” under which Chrysalis operates, is no exception. To make

ends meet for the whole program, my stipend as Chrysalis Coordinator was reduced last year. However, individual donations like Nova's to Isaiah Prison Ministry at St. John's Episcopal Church have helped me raise sufficient funds for a part-time position there. In the year ahead, we hope to find new revenue sources for both Chrysalis and the Willow program, Rev. Etter's most recent effort for women at York with long sentences.

On other "fronts," I continue to lead the Diocesan Prison Ministry Committee **Faith Behind Bars**. In the last year the group changed its name to **Faith Behind Bars and Beyond** to reflect the interest and participation of its members in ministry both "inside" and "outside" prison walls. We received a stipend from the diocese that we immediately used to hire a very ministry-minded and technologically skilled woman to develop a website for the group. You can check it out at [www.faithbehindbars.org](http://www.faithbehindbars.org). Our hope is provide contact information and links to prison related resources and activities for volunteers, former inmates, and families with connections to incarceration. We are just getting started, but we see great potential for good in this endeavor. There is a link on the website (<http://www.faithbehindbars.org/Links.html>) to a sermon that I preached on prison ministry at the Episcopal Cathedral in Hartford on November 21. Soon we will also post publicity for the **Fourth Annual Faith Behind Bars Forum** featuring keynote speaker Piper Kerman. Piper is a Vassar graduate who spent a year in the federal prison in Danbury, Connecticut on drug charges. She is author of Orange Is the New Black, the story of her incarceration. If you would like to know more about the very real life inside prison, I encourage you to read this book. Her reflections and stories can help us see how our present prison system must be changed to promote lasting transformation, reduce recidivism, and save tax dollars. Last year we had over 100 participants at the Forum, including 20 Chrysalis graduates who have been released. We expect even more this year because many of the women are now connected through Facebook. Putting this conference together is a major undertaking, but it has proven to be a source of great encouragement for everyone who comes. We are looking forward to another stimulating, energizing great day on April 9th.

Finally, I want you all to know how deeply grateful I am for all of the prayers, encouragement, and support that you have provided for this ministry over the past years. Your enthusiastic, heart-felt response to the Stations of the Cross last spring was yet another tangible blessing for the women of Chrysalis and for me. As I have indicated, the prison scene in Connecticut and throughout the nation appears to be entering a time of major reform. Prison ministry will need to adapt in order to respond in new ways to the continuing needs of those "inside" and "outside." As people of faith and as citizens, let us pray that we all may be able to see where the Spirit is leading and move forward with vision, courage, and faithfulness.

Sending blessings, thanks, and love,

Valerie

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#### **Special Events in Chrysalis and at York Correctional Institution**

**Hartford Seminary Women's Leadership Conference** – Participants met with women of Chrysalis for conversation and faith sharing on four Sunday afternoons in October.

**Labyrinth Walk on Good Friday** – Labyrinth facilitator Ann O'Connor led a morning of walking meditation and journaling. Collage interpretations of the Stations of the Cross created by the women of Chrysalis surrounded the Labyrinth.

#### **Additional Courses and Activities at York C.I. Sponsored by A Sacred Place**

**Art** – Opportunities for creative self-expression in a variety of media led by Christie Fisher for Chrysalis on the East side and by Martha Talburt for Willow on the West side

**Houses of Healing** – A 12 week course in spiritual awareness and emotional healing led by Beth Chipman for the Charlene Perkins Pre-Release Center

**(FOR A COMPLETE LIST CLICK [HERE](#))**



## Implications of Being a Small Planet – Part 1

Paul (1 Corinthians 13:8-12) *“Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part. When I was a child I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.”*

Einstein was asked, *“When will your theories of physics be accepted?”* He replied, *“When all those who have taught me physics have died.”*

If you Google “small planet” a typical entry discusses one of two topics. First, the planet is becoming smaller – we are closer to even our distant neighbors – as transportation and communication technology shrink the separators of distance and time. Second, human beings on the planet are becoming more conscious of the limited resources available, and the need to husband these resources, so that we can all live together in an equitable fashion.

Some entries in this second category discuss the relevance of theology in husbanding our limited resources in an equitable manner. And there are a few entries (perhaps one in five hundred) that place our small planet in relation to a much larger cosmos. There are even some entries that talk about theology in the context of a vast cosmos.

It is this last area that I want to explore in this essay. My starting point is a simple premise: the reason for being of this vast cosmos is that a loving God is sharing existence – and the comprehension of this existence – with independent beings able to love one another and thereby image God. Some have reasoned in the other direction – from evidence in the “book of nature” to the existence (or non-existence) of God, but I have an interest in seeing how the premise plays out in light of our ever growing understanding of how the cosmos came to be and how it is evolving.

The cosmos is huge. The raw mass of the universe in kilograms is on the order of ten raised to the fifty-sixth power. There are perhaps a hundred billion galaxies. Space itself is expanding. We think we have a pretty good idea of what has happened to the universe going back to a very small fraction of the first second after the Big Bang.

Quite remarkably, this vast cosmos is fairly uniform. This uniformity was first observed when the cosmic background radiation was discovered in 1964 – it appeared to be the same in all directions. Subsequent – and more precise – measurements of the cosmic background put a number on this “sameness”: no matter where in the cosmos you look, it is the same to within a very small degree. How small? As small as an ant compared to the height of the Empire State Building. The technical term for this is that the cosmos is “isotropic.”

This means that in any sufficiently large space (about two hundred million light years across) there will be exactly the same amounts and proportions of all the basic chemical elements and (as evolution goes forward) the building blocks of life (amino acids and the like).

What about life on other planets? Science is looking for evidence in the conventional manner. But a faith oriented premise -- that the cosmos is here in the first place because a loving God is sharing existence – already suggests an answer. If there is life on Earth there is life in abundance throughout the cosmos: wherever life can evolve, it will evolve.

It is of some interest that scientists (under a grant from NASA) recently discovered what they believe to be strange life forms in California’s Mono Lake. These life forms appear to have substituted arsenic for phosphorous in their DNA (i.e. their genetic code) and in their ATP (i.e. their energy processing molecule). Apparently, Mono Lake has high levels of arsenic but low levels of phosphorous.

If life is robust and adaptable – as it should be if God is sharing existence – it should not be surprising that evolution would find a substitute for

phosphorous in an environment like Mono Lake. Nor should it be surprising that sentient civilizations like our own are evolving throughout the cosmos. If there were but one such civilization per galaxy that would mean a hundred billion such civilizations, in round numbers.

This God, this Abba that we call our own is – to understate the matter – prolific.

What does this mean for religious explanations for why we are here and where we are going?

I am currently listening to a series of lectures on *Comparative Religion* produced by The Teaching Company. At one point the professor gave an anecdote from his own experience. He was part of a delegation of Christians hosted by a Saudi sheik. The sheik was a devout Muslim and was determined to raise the question whether Christians believed there was only one God, and if so how Jesus Christ could be the Son of God. The discussion was resolved by observing the different ways that Muslims and Christians describe how God provides revelation: for Muslims, God's revelation is the Holy Qur'an; for Christians God's revelation is through Jesus Christ.

What is the truth of the matter?

Or is "truth" even the right question to ask?

How is God active in the world, and how do we know God? As long as the focus was on this small planet Earth it seemed plausible to imagine that God could act – and did act – at will. "Revelation" reflected such an act, whether the Ten Commandments given to Moses or the Qur'an recited to Muhammad. Communities would then form around such revelations and spread the word.

But what if God's manner of sharing existence is more subtle than this? We are a stiff-necked people unresponsive to direct commands and untutored in subtlety. Nor do we react well to change. Evolution on a cosmic scale has only

recently entered the "book of nature" recognized as being God's work.

We may be stick-necked and a slow learner of subtle ways, but cosmic evolution suggests a rather simple explanation for the varieties of religious experience and understanding: these understandings are themselves the product of an evolution, a work still in progress.

And the specifics of this evolution are particular to the various communities of faith. Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, Christians and Jews each have their own story. Buddhists and Hindus have a cyclic notion of cosmic change, whereas the three monotheistic religions have a linear view. But all of them developed their understandings of the sacred long before evolution – either biological (c. 1859 with Darwin) or cosmic (c.1964 with the Big Bang) – became part of the "book of nature."

Does "truth" evolve? Even asking the question raises the specter of civilization coming unglued. Theologians have developed a suite of terms to counter challenges to truth: "syncretism" or "false irenicism" subordinates the truth to a spirit of conciliation; "relativism" values different opinions comparably regardless of the truth; "indifferentism" treats the differences between opinions as of little importance, subordinating the truth.

None of these concerns fits the fresh reality that is unfolding before our eyes. Something marvelous is afoot. A loving God is sharing existence, not by planting life – and then us – within an otherwise inert cosmos but by the subtlety of an ever pregnant cosmos whose cup runneth over with love.

This small and pregnant planet is not alone.

What does this mean for Jesus Christ?

What does this mean for the "universal Church"?

What does this mean for change in how a stiff-necked people love one another?

TO BE CONTINUED.