

Nuns in the Northeast are racing to keep sacred grounds out of developers' reach

By Bridget Macdonald | Medill News Service, Washington DC



PLAINVILLE, Mass. (RNS) — Looking over the wooded parcel her Catholic order sold in 1992, Sister Chris Loughlin stood with arms folded, the regret on her face plain to see.

But Loughlin and her fellow Dominican sisters in this town about 30 miles southwest of Boston have more than made up for the loss of 10 acres from the former orchard that was bequeathed to the order in 1949.

Gesturing to surrounding fields and forests, Loughlin explained, “Now we

have these 42 acres, and 32 of them are in a conservation restriction. So no matter what happens at this point, at least the land is preserved.”

The old orchard is now home to the Crystal Springs Earth Learning Center, and the rambling farmhouse is the unassuming headquarters for a remarkable land conservation initiative, the Religious Lands Conservancy.

Launched by Loughlin in 2002 with the Massachusetts Land Trust Coalition, the Religious Lands Conservancy has been instrumental in placing hundreds of acres of property owned by religious communities into conservation. With a faith-based mission to protect the earth, Loughlin has approached congregations throughout the Northeast to broach the spiritual value of conservation.

It's not just a feel-good spiritual mission. Over the past 40 years, the number of Catholic nuns has plummeted 66 percent, and the number of Catholic brothers by 60 percent. The financial strain of dwindling membership has resulted in lucrative – and often attractive – offers to sell the orders' land over to developers.

Loughlin said although religious orders are fading, their land could yet be a lasting legacy.

She is among a growing network of Catholic sisters who have re-examined their connection with the earth in the context of their faith. Mary Evelyn Tucker, a professor of environmental studies and religious studies at Yale University, said the increasing involvement of religious groups in preservation is not simply a trend, but “the rediscovery of ancient traditions.”

“All the rituals of world religions are very much nature-based,” she said.

The green-sister revolution is rooted in the teachings of the late Rev. Thomas Berry, who before his death last June fostered the idea that the environmental crisis must also be understood as a spiritual crisis. Sister Mariam MacGillis, a Dominican nun who has been at the forefront of the movement, said Berry's perspective shifted her work “quite radically” to encompass a respect for all life on earth.

Ever since MacGillis co-founded the 226-acre Genesis Farm Earth Learning Center in Blairstown, N.J., in 1980, Catholic sisters across the U.S. and Canada have woven environmental justice and community-supported agriculture into their religious vocation.

In a state that is the nation's third-most densely populated, the Dominican sisters of Plainville are helping to save a critical habitat, said Bob Wilber, director of land protection for the Massachusetts Audubon Society, and their foresight has helped spark conversations with other orders. "Some of the most significant land left (in Massachusetts) is owned by religious entities," he said.

As religious orders took root across the U.S. in the 19th century, they built vast networks of schools, hospitals and orphanages to provide social services to the poor and marginalized. The rise of government and private programs, however, made many of these institutions obsolete.



In the mid 1970s, the sisters in Plainville confronted an increasingly familiar situation: fewer students were enrolling in their parochial school, and shrinking numbers of sisters meant having to hire (and pay) lay teachers.

"We converted that school building into a home for our retired sisters," Loughlin said.

In a scenario faced by many Catholic orders, the cash-strapped sisters began to sell off pieces of property to help pay

for the care of elderly members. In similar situations, land that was once eyed for a cemetery was split into subdivisions, and shuttered churches have been converted to million-dollar condos.

Yet Kathy McGrath of the Massachusetts Land Trust Coalition said many religious groups are starting to see that the benefits of protecting land often outweigh the costs, although some still need convincing.

"It's so important," McGrath said, "to have someone like Chris who is connected to..."

"Old nuns," Loughlin interjected from across the table.

McGrath laughed, and then finished her thought. "She speaks their language, and they respect her."

McGrath acknowledged that for many religious orders that are short on cash, preserving property in a land trust or a conservation easement might seem to make little financial sense. "They are giving up rights, for very little in return monetarily," she said.

Yet Loughlin has appealed to religious communities by stressing the importance of perpetuity – leaving a legacy for future generations – a concept that advocates for conservation value as well.

Although more congregations have been coming to the Religious Land Conservancy for guidance, McGrath said, the work remains urgent.

“We are kind of in a hurry to get to some of these places that have real value for conservation before they are sold.”

About 60 miles to the southeast, at the gateway to Cape Cod, the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary has run a retreat center on 118 acres of waterfront property in Buzzards Bay since 1943.

Waterfront land in the area has skyrocketed in value, and the congregation has had many offers to sell. Yet the Rev. Stanley Kolasa, the center’s director, explained that “we realized that this is a gift – this is a gifted place. We want in some way to return the gift.”

With financial uncertainties prompting difficult questions, members of the congregation looked for answers at the Religious Lands Conservancy’s 2005 conference. Mass Audubon joined the conversation, and the land soon became a top priority for the state’s Coastal and Estuarine Land Conservation Program.

“It blossomed into a contiguous 300 acres on the ocean,” said Mass Audubon’s Wilber. “It’s probably the last time this will ever happen with land fronting on the water.”

Just one town south of Plainville, in Attleboro, the La Salette brothers have been another success story. The order built the Shrine of Our Lady of La Salette in 1953 adjacent to pristine woodlands, but the area became increasingly difficult for the brothers to manage.

“That land was being abused significantly by vandals, all-terrain vehicles, they were having drug parties in the woods,” said the Rev. Roger Plante.

Plante said the La Salette brothers wanted the land to be as much of a draw for spiritual reflection as the shrine had become, and enlisted the help of the Religious Lands Conservancy.

Charlie Wyman, a land protection specialist with Mass Audubon who worked with the brothers, said although this was his first partnership with a religious community, “we quickly discovered while we see the property through different lenses, our goals were virtually the same: to see property protected for all time for wildlife and people.”

Plante called the collaboration “almost miraculous,” saying it enabled the brothers to extend their traditional mission of healing to include the environment.

“When we speak of reconciliation, for too many years it was between us and God, us and our neighbors, us and ourselves,” said Plante.

“But more and more, we are highlighting the need for heavy-duty reconciliation between us and the Earth.”

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www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/01/01/AR2010010101586.html