

A Call To Communion with Creation



A reflection and invitation from the joint meeting of the First Order Franciscans (JPE) Justice Peace and Ecology (JPIC) Justice Peace and Integrity of Creation (JPSC) Justice Peace and Safeguarding of Creation ministers in the United States and Canada held at St. Francis Retreat House, Easton, Pennsylvania, November 6-11, 2005.

To Our Brothers and Sisters in Francis, Clare and Christ:
Peace and all good!

For the last several days, we who serve as the directors and animators of the Justice, Peace and Ecology/Integrity of Creation/Safeguarding of Creation (JPE/ JPIC/JPSC) ministries in the provinces of the Franciscans of the First Order, met and reflected on how our Franciscan Intellectual Tradition (FIT) might assist us in addressing environmental issues. We share these brief reflections with you in the hope that you will join us in the task of responding in our time to the call that God gave to Francis at San Damiano: to rebuild a house that is falling into ruin.

Wounded Creation, Ruptured Communion

At the outset, we must confess that, compared with our efforts to achieve greater justice and peace among our brothers and sisters in the human family, we have tended to give less attention to our brothers and sisters in creation.

They, too, are suffering; and their disease, wrought by our actions and neglect, is now our own.

Our depletion of the ozone layer has made Brother Sun's embrace not only warm and radiant but also potentially fatal.

Our explorations of space have left junk littering the home of Sister Moon and the stars.

Our pollution of the air has made Brother Wind's breath toxic, particularly for children.

Our treatment of our lakes, rivers, streams and oceans has made Sister Water sick.

Our voracious appetite for fossil fuels has made Brother Fire the carrier of not only warmth and light but also destruction and war.

Our lifestyles have abused our Sister and Mother Earth, and our work-addicted alienation from her natural rhythms and our own has led us, in many ways, to disown her.

Our insatiable desires and the seductions of technology have deluded us into pretending that we might escape the embrace of our Sister Bodily Death, whom we too often flee in fear rather than accept in faith.

We have ruptured our communion—with our God, with creation, and with ourselves. We have traded the truth of our interdependence

for an illusion of independence, our call to stewardship on behalf of our fellow creatures for a rusting crown of domination. We confess that we sinned through our own fault, from what we have done and from what we have failed to do. We firmly resolve, with the help of God's abundant grace, to do penance and to amend our lives in part by reclaiming the wisdom of our own Franciscan life and history.

Traditional Medicine:

Finding Healing in Our Roots

During our time here in Easton, we were blessed with the insights of Keith Warner, OFM, and Ilia Delio, OSF, two scholars and contemporary stewards of the Franciscan Intellectual Tradition. They reminded us that we can help to heal creation, including ourselves, by more fully tilling the rich soil of knowledge and spirituality handed on to us.

In St. Francis of Assisi, we are reminded of our union with all of creation. That union is rooted in God's voluntary poverty, revealed in God's compassionate self-donation. This incredible generosity began with the act of creating the cosmos and reached its high point in the person of Jesus Christ, first through the Incarnation and then in the Paschal Mystery. Francis saw it echoed further in the Eucharist when he wrote in *A Letter to the Entire Order* (27):

O sublime humility!
O humble sublimity!
The Lord of the universe,
God and the Son of God,
so humbles Himself
that for our salvation
He hides himself
under an ordinary piece of bread!

In this, Francis was able to recognize the Eucharist as "the source and summit" of the church's life centuries before the Second Vatican Council. It became for him the definitive symbol of not only our communion with God and one another but also with the whole of creation. We have become accustomed to thinking of the liturgy, the church's act of public service, as a locus for our action on behalf of justice and peace. Francis' reflections on the Eucharist and the elements of sacrament—the integration of action, word and the things of the earth—challenge us to also make it a locus for our action on behalf of the integrity of creation.

These reflections also invite us to consider creation as a sacrament, with God speaking, acting and creating something new from a formless wasteland and wind-swept waters (Genesis 1:1-2:4).

Duns Scotus would later emphasize creation and our communion with God as the results of God's initiative; however, St. Bonaventure saw creation and communion as a consequence of the divine nature itself. As Ilia Delio noted in her essay, *Are We At Home In The Cosmos? A Franciscan Perspective* (3):

Bonaventure's theology of creation takes as its starting point the Trinity of love. Creation is a limited expression of the infinite and dynamic love between the Father and the Son. To say that creation flows out of the infinite fountain of divine love is to say that God is creative and loving. In order for divine glory to be consciously expressed, God creates human beings who are capable of participating in and manifesting that glory. Thus God freely creates a glorious universe and calls forth within this universe human persons who are endowed with the freedom to participate in this divine artistic splendor.

Responding to this generous invitation demands that we enter more deeply into contemplation. "In Bonaventure's view," Francis came to 'see' God in

creation because he contemplated God in the things of creation. Contemplation is a penetrating gaze that gets to the truth of reality" (id., 2). Scotus went further, developing his doctrine of individuation or *haecceitas* in light of Francis, i.e., the idea that "things are God-like in their specificity. Thus regular, daily attention to the wider world of creatures/nature is fundamental to realizing that the world is charged with the grandeur of God" (id.). This holy attentiveness enables us to tap into God's power and thus enables us to share in God's work.

Roger Bacon, a thirteenth century son of Francis and "delayed vocation," responded enthusiastically and creatively to the call to collaborate with God. He embodied in his time what Keith Warner proposed is a critical task of Franciscans today: to pray with, learn from and act on behalf of nature. Keith added that this demands "that we take nature seriously—take it seriously as an agent of religious conversion, and as an object of our interest and compassion" [*Taking Nature Seriously: Nature mysticism, environmental advocacy and the Franciscan Tradition*, WTU Symposium:

"Franciscans and Creation: What is Our Responsibility?" (May 2003), 3].

It also requires that we join Francis in becoming what Keith called "vernacular theologians," i.e., those who can translate our experiences and nature's voices in meaningful ways. Bacon, he recalled, "learned from careful observation of nature, describing its properties and behavior, and articulating this knowledge with theology, education and ethics. He was what we would today term an interdisciplinary scholar" (id., 21). Keith added that his study of Bacon and other sources caused him to conclude that animating concern

for creation will demand a different pedagogy, including: more emphasis on education and spiritual formation (eco-literacy); integrating a contemplative perspective and practice; and linking the FIT with critical questions about society, science and technology.

Our deeper understanding of the communion of creation increases our consciousness of our interdependence. It also requires that we develop a more holistic understanding of our world, avoiding destructive dualisms (humanity vs. nature, spiritual vs. material, etc.) and the compartmentalization that has even contaminated our own work when we have failed to integrate environmental concerns with our work for justice and peace. We can no longer separate, for example, the environmental degradation wrought by the use of depleted uranium weapons in Iraq from the gross violations of human rights at Abu Ghraib and other prisons or the weakening of international law by engaging in a preemptive attack on another nation without the necessary condition of an imminent and not merely “gathering” threat. All are dimensions of the same sin.

An Invitation to Transformation

Our annual rhythms of renewal in the seasons of Advent and Lent present us with opportunities to engage more deeply in our call to be ambassadors of Christ and ministers of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:20).



We invite you to join us in a special effort to begin to be reconciled with creation: not only with our brothers and sisters within the Franciscan family, church and world but also with Brother Sun, Sister Moon, Brother Wind, Sister Water, Brother Fire, Sister Death, and our Mother and Sister, Earth.

On the First Sunday of Advent, we cry out in our Responsorial Psalm (80), “Lord, make us turn to you; let us see your face and we shall be saved.” During this season of contemplation may we all more consciously behold God’s face in creation as well as in word and sacrament.

- Take a slow and prayerful walk in the woods, along a lake or in the park. Stop, look, listen, touch, smell and taste the goodness of the Lord.
- Reconsider how the Eucharist mirrors the divine presence permeating creation.
- As God has been humbly and willingly poured forth in creation and the Incarnation, take the risk of humbly and willingly sharing your life and faith with those around you as you reflect together on the Scriptures. Make *lectio divina* also *lectio transformativa*.

In Lent we hear the timeless exhortation to *metanoia*, change of heart. For the ancients, the heart was the seat of being and the throne from which issued all commands to act—to do good or to do evil. The traditional penitential practices of lent—prayer, fasting and almsgiving—are intended to lead us to true transformation. Every Ash Wednesday, God urges us through the prophet Joel (2:12a, 13a): “return to me with your whole heart...rend your hearts, not your garments, and return to the LORD, your God.” We

Selected Resources

Ilia Delio, “Are We At Home In The Cosmos?: A Franciscan Perspective,” *New Theology Review* (November 2005), 31-39.

A Franciscan View of Creation: Learning to Live in a Sacramental World (Franciscan Institute 2003).

James B. Martin-Schramm and Robert L. Stivers, *Christian Environmental Ethics: A Case Method Approach* (Maryknoll 2003).

Dawn Nothwehr (Ed.), *Franciscan Theology of the Environment* (Franciscan Press 2002).

Pope John Paul II, *Peace with God the Father, Peace with All Creation*, Message for World Day of Peace (January 1990), <http://conservation.catholic.org/ecologicalcrisis.htm>

Eric Schlosser, *Fast Food Nation: the Dark Side of the American Meal* (Perennial 2001).

Christopher Uhl, *Developing Ecological Consciousness: Path to a Sustainable World* (Rowman & Littlefield 2003).

Mathis Wackernagel and William Rees, *Our Ecological Footprint: Reducing Human Impact on the Earth* (New Society Pub. 2003).

Keith D. Warner, “Taking Nature Seriously: Nature Mysticism, Franciscan Spirituality, and Environmental Advocacy.” In: Ilia Delio OSF (Ed.), *Franciscans and Creation: What is Our Responsibility?* (Franciscan Institute 2004), <http://www.scu.edu/envs/whoware/whoware-facultyandstaff-kwarner.html>

invite you to heed this summons by returning again to God present in creation.

- *Prayer and contemplation*—Reflect on how well the natural and man-made worlds are integrated in your church or chapel. Remember the needs of creation in your intercessions. Set time aside at the end of the day to simply give thanks for all the ways you have seen God is manifest in all of creation. Devote more of your personal prayer time to simply “being” before God, resting in the divine presence.
- *Fasting*—Step away from the drive-thru and into the desert by fasting from fast food for the 40 days of Lent. Put aside for a time a piece of technology (cell phone, computer, I-pod) to which you have become wed. Take a real day off from work. Join your family or community for a day of recollection—24 hours—at a house in the woods

or near a lake, away from the office, phones, and all the other things that are marvelous instruments but also distractions in our lives.

- *Almsgiving*—Set aside some funds (perhaps what you have *not* spent on fast food) and make a donation to a local community supported agriculture (CSA) program. Invest in simple energy-saving technologies like compact fluorescent lights. Purchase “fair trade” and/or organic foods (coffee, tea, cocoa, vegetables, etc.) that are produced with more sustainable agricultural practices and provide the farmers who grow them with a more just return for their labors.

These are only suggestions. Can you think of something that is more meaningful and life changing? Whatever you decide to do, share it with some one else. It may challenge or inspire them.

We admit that, in the face of the immensity of our planet’s suffering, what we have proposed may seem like a handful of band-aids. We cannot forget, however, that salvation came to us wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger (Luke 2:6) and that our founder’s conversion turned on the simple act of embracing a leper.

Let us begin, then. For up to now, we have done very little.



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