



Franciscan Action Network

Transforming the World in the Spirit of St. Francis and St. Clare

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The Franciscan Vision and the Oil Spill

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For St. Francis “nature” was an expression of God’s infinite love. Animate and inanimate parts of creation were not just meant to provide substance to human beings. They were also revered as a window into the divine. The experience of beauty in creation has been part of the Franciscan path that led many to experience God as Beauty and Goodness at the heart of all that exists. Angelina of Foligno, a XIII century Franciscan mystic, used to exclaim in the middle of the Eucharist celebration: “The Earth is pregnant with God!” What a beautiful affirmation and articulation of the mystery of incarnation!

The diversity of creation – among them endangered ocean turtles, dolphins, coral reefs, pelicans and a host of other creatures – are in themselves “little words” of God in the sacred book of creation that reveals the face of Christ. The more Francis contemplated the book of creation and descended in solidarity with all of creation, the more he ascended to God – not leaving the fellow creatures behind, but joining them in praise and thanksgiving. St. Bonaventure reminds us that a failure to see and love creation with God’s eyes can have disastrous consequences for us:

Therefore any person who is not illuminated by such great splendor in created things is blind. Anyone who is not awakened by such great outcries is blind. Anyone who is not led by such effects to give praise to God is mute... Therefore open your eyes; alert your spiritual dear; unlock your lips, and apply your heart so that in all creatures you may see, hear, praise, love, and adore, magnify, and honor your God lest the entire world rise up against you.
(Bonaventure, Itinerarium Mentis in Deum)

The Franciscan tradition can help prevent the world rising up against us and can lead us on a spiritual journey beyond selfish desires to a sense of wonder and amazement over God’s humble love and goodness permeating and overflowing into the world. That path led Francis of Assisi to recognize profound kinship between human beings and the rest of God’s creation. The Patron Saint of ecology came to understand that all forms of life - human and non-human – were uniquely loved by God and radically dependent on divine grace. This awareness imbued St. Francis with a sense of solidarity and compassion for all God’s creatures.

One of the most well known and loved episodes from St. Francis’ life was when he prayed in front of the crucifix in a small dilapidated San Damiano church and heard the words: “Francis, rebuild my house; as you see, it is being destroyed.” Immediately, he got up, picked up the stones and, with the help of others, rebuilt the church. Gradually, however, he realized that Christ’s words were also referring to Christ’s mystical body the Church: the wounded institution and its marginalized members: the poor and lepers. At last, Francis came to see that the “house of God” was not just the human person or even the Church, but also the earth itself, totally permeated by God’s indwelling presence.

As we look at the images of the devastation from the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, could Christ be calling each one of us by name, and urging us to rebuild God's house that is being destroyed?



Are we listening to that voice speaking to us through the Scripture, through the signs of the times, or the images of former beauty and harmony now smeared by death and destruction?

As we agonize over the stories from the Gulf of Mexico and the images of crude oil gushing out of the undersea well, or a white bird soaked in thick filthy substance, perhaps we may begin to wonder what is happening to our world. Is it falling into ruin? The contemporary world is built in part on a shaky foundation: a belief that we are separated from the rest of God's creation; that we can find fulfillment in purely material pursuits; and, that we have the unquestionable right to consume a disproportionate percentage of the world's resources, regardless of the fact that this is unsustainable and that it tears apart the very life-support system of our planet. The disaster in the Gulf of Mexico is just one albeit potent symptom of a much larger problem that besets us: rapid deforestation and desertification, the loss of bio-diversity, ocean acidification, and, of course, global climate change. This world is, indeed, crumbling down. In and of itself, technology will not save us. The military might of our nation will not save us. Big bank accounts, our gated communities – or even the relative security of a professed religious life – will not guarantee safety in the long-run.

It is time that we as Franciscans and Franciscan-hearted people listen more attentively to the voice of Christ speaking to us through the signs of the times: addressing us from the cross of the polluted coast of Louisiana, the mountain-top removal sites of West Virginia, South Pacific Islands that are slowly disappearing under rising sea levels. Are we listening?



For those of us Franciscans who have professed the public vow of obedience – a word derived from a Latin verb for listening – this directly touches on the question of how faithfully we are in living out our public commitments. Are we obedient to, that is, are we listening to God and all of our kin in the community of life?

What is our response to Christ's call: "Rebuild my house; as you see, it is being destroyed"? How do we go about witnessing to the power of the Gospel in the ecological age of oil spills and other environmental woes? First of all, we need to help one another realize the high value, urgency and the need in our world for a Franciscan view of creation. Its precious elements can be fitting stones for the task of rebuilding the world as the sacrament of God's presence. The recent project of the Retrieval of the Franciscan Intellectual Tradition provides us with wonderful resources and gives us a unique opportunity to delve into the past, retrieve our rich tradition so that we could put into practice as individuals and religious or parish communities. (Here I would like to highlight [A Franciscan View of Creation](#) by Ilia Delio, OSF; [Rejoicing in the Works of the Lord: Beauty in the Franciscan Tradition](#) by Mary Beth Ingham, CSJ; and [Care for Creation: a Franciscan spirituality of the Earth](#) by Ilia Delio, OSF and Keith Warner, OFM and Pamela Wood.)

If we are to move beyond a popular, quaint sentimentality of Francis in the birdbath, we must sharpen our prophetic sensitivities by embracing in a new way the poor and the earth itself that are being pillaged and desecrated. A key element is direct contact with those that are being affected and a critical analysis of the social reality. Have courage to ask deep questions: what factors contribute to this and other environmental problems; what beliefs and values support the status quo and which challenge it; who makes decisions, who pays the price and who reaps a lion's share of benefits; what do Scripture, the Church's social teachings and the Franciscan tradition have to say? What is the level of our environmental literacy? For example, do we allow ourselves to be duped and deceived by those who have a vested interest in the status quo and who peddle junk science masquerading as a reputable source of information? To keep yourself well-informed and motivated, consider going to www.earthbeatradio.org/home for a weekly one-hour broadcast, not only to hear the threats to God's creation but also about the signs of hope. (For more reliable resources, go to FAN's Care for Creation webpage: <http://www.franciscanaction.org/careforcreation> or Holy Name Province's JPIC webpage: <http://www.hnp.org/jpic/>.)

Responding with integrity to the oil spill in the gulf requires that we squarely face and begin to transform our habits of high consumption that we have grown accustomed to and take for granted. Historically, the Franciscan tradition challenges us to resist abstractions or concepts devoid of particularity and concreteness. This insight applies to our relationship with God and the rest of God's creation. Can we as Franciscans authentically speak about the sacramentality of God's creation, sing hymns such as "O Creatures of Our God and King," bless animals on Oct. 4, or relish in the fact that St. Francis is a patron saint of the ecology while being oblivious to how our patterns of consumption might be antithetical to what we profess and publicly celebrate? To move it beyond the basic practice of recycling that hopefully all of us do, we ought to reflect on our daily pattern of eating and drinking. Do we consider how our food choices affect people and ecosystems, including way beyond our borders?

Before we lament the desolation caused by the oil spill, we ought to realize that, for example, every year about 45 million barrels of oils is used to produce an enormous quantity of bottled water in the U.S. that is environmentally and morally unsound. Over the past few years, a number of Franciscan religious sisters have lunch a campaign against the bottled water. Have you heard about it, do you put it into practice personally and in your community? Be it a recycling, avoiding bottled water, or abstaining from the use of plastic bags – they are just small, baby steps toward a more graced and beautiful future. These steps – small series of decisions on the path of ecological conversion – not only make a positive difference on the environment, but most importantly they change us.

Can our lives – as professed Franciscans or as lay men and women – become a living parable of God’s Kingdom where we would ensure a place for the poor and for our non-human kin at God’s abundant banquet of life?

Liturgy, the oil spill, and care for creation

Francis had a great love for the liturgy of the Church, especially for the Eucharist which he experienced as a celebration of God’s ongoing incarnation. Confronted by the horrific oil spill in the gulf and the deeper environmental crisis, we as Franciscans ought to ask ourselves to what extent we make explicit the intimate connection between these signs of the times and Eucharistic mystery. An ancient maxim of the Church - *Lex orandi, lex credendi* – reminds us of the truth that how we pray shapes what we believe in and how we act. This begs the question: do we pray for the wellbeing of God’s creation? For example, do we strive to ensure that the Prayers of the Faithful in liturgy on Sundays reflect the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of all human and nonhuman members of God’s web of life? Does the Word of God – through whom, in whom, and for whom everything came into being – that is being preached on Sunday reflect our love for our Sister, Mother Earth and summon the Church to the ecological conversion? Making an explicit connection between the liturgy that we celebrate as the Church and the call to care for the Earth and be in communion and solidarity with all God’s creatures is a gift that we as Franciscans can offer the wider Church. The Church urgently needs this gift for its spiritual, intellectual and moral integrity. Liturgy that is well done can be a source of great empowerment. Are we willing to stir into flame the gift that God has given us? (2 Tim. 1:6-7) Can one lament the abuse of power by some governmental agencies, transnational corporations like BP or other entities without taking a look at ourselves who are stewards of the liturgy of the Church? Could it be that a pretense of helplessness, or certain unwillingness to draw out the social, ecological and political implication of the Eucharist on the part of us as the Church, be even more detrimental to the wellbeing of our Sister, Mother Earth?

Advocacy

As Franciscans and Franciscan-hearted people we are called to be co-creators of beauty, coartists with God, whose ear is delicately attuned to the music of human heart. We are gifted with imagination and the rich Franciscan tradition that speaks to us about a sacramental world in which God’s presence would be more transparent. We are also sent to be troubadours of hope singing a song of a new, more humane and sustainable world. Following Mary, and beholding God’s promise of life for all creation, we are to say YES to God and YES to this vocation.

One of the major aspects of this vocation is the urgent need to advocate in a public square for those who cannot speak for themselves. We must strive to ensure a greater respect for all of life: human and non-human; in our local neighborhoods, and in the Gulf of Mexico. Building up on our effort to defend the life of the unborn, we are also to continue to advocate for the poor and future generations and stand up for the entire web of life that is becoming unraveled.

The gravity of the social sins which cry to heaven, among them the irrational destruction of nature, demands from us a decisive action. As Americans, we have a particular moral responsibility to advocate for public policies that would promote the common good of all God's creation. To quote John Paul II, we as Christians are being invited to "*a commitment to overcome every form of exploitation and oppression. It is a question not only of alleviating the most serious and urgent needs through individual actions here and there, but of uncovering the roots of evil and proposing initiatives to make social, political and economic structures more just and fraternal.*" (Church in America#18)

The Franciscan Action Network provides us with a unique opportunity to address the roots of injustice. Do you take full advantage of FAN? Have you considered inviting your family, friends, and fellow parishioners to join?

It is time to heal a painful and disastrous gap that all too often exists between spiritual life and political involvement. Are we ready to get Francis out of the birdbath and into the real world that needs him – the world blemished by the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, deforestation, global climate change? Will we trust the Holy Spirit and, through Franciscan Action Network, copartner with God who desires to heal, "make all things new" and bring forth even greater beauty?

