



# Franciscan Action Network

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

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## Holy Week 2011

### *The Way We Treat Ourselves:*

A reflection on the anniversary of the BP Deepwater Horizon Gulf oil spill.

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April 20, 2011 marks the one-year anniversary of the BP Deepwater Horizon explosion and Gulf of Mexico oil spill, the “largest accidental marine oil spill in U.S. history, an acute human and environmental tragedy.”<sup>i</sup> Having been born and raised on the Florida Gulf Coast, I was especially troubled by the disaster. After a year’s time, \$3.5 billion of the \$20 billion compensation fund has been spent to restore the ecology and livelihoods of those impacted by the spill.<sup>ii</sup> The sugar-white beaches of the Gulf Coast are still in the process of being cleaned of the black oil and tar, now with large sand-sifting tractors called Sand Sharks. Bird nesting season started on March 1<sup>st</sup>, complicating the process and raising concerns for their health.<sup>iii</sup> Nearly all of the waters of the Gulf of Mexico have been reopened to commercial fishing.<sup>iv</sup> Coastal towns and cities hope to rebuild their economies with the return of tourists this spring and summer.<sup>v</sup> In February, the U.S. government approved the first deep water oil drilling permit since the spill. However, the ultimate environmental consequences of the spill may not be known for some time to come. Most of the oil slick disappeared from the surface of the Gulf of Mexico in July 2010, but in March 2011, a study found that “huge quantities of oil [...] now taint the Gulf of Mexico’s seafloor” in what is described as an “invertebrate graveyard.”<sup>vi</sup> Also, just in the months of January and February alone, the infant mortality rate of the dolphins living off the shores of Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana is already 10 times the yearly average.<sup>vii</sup> Although the direct cause is still unknown, this is a very disturbing development.



U.S. Coast Guard. Courtesy of Visual Information Gallery: <http://cgvi.uscg.mil>

Despite the overall ecological impact of the oil spill, it is very important to remember that eleven people lost their lives from the explosion and their families and loved ones will carry their loss for the rest of their lives. What is most tragic is that the loss of human life and negative impact on the Gulf ecology appears to be the result of sheer negligence and mismanagement on the part of BP, Transocean, Halliburton, and federal industry regulators.<sup>viii</sup> There is mounting evidence that the companies involved put short term profits over the safety and lives of workers and of the Gulf of Mexico ecosystem.<sup>ix</sup>

The worst thing that we can do is not learn from this experience; and learn especially that there is an interconnected relationship between humanity and the natural environment. Concerning this relationship, Pope Benedict XVI explains, “*The way humanity treats the environment influences the way it treats itself, and vice versa.*”<sup>x</sup> This relationship is clearly evident in the Deepwater Horizon disaster. The same negligent, short sighted, and dare I say it, greedy acts of BP, Transocean, and Halliburton hurt *both* people *and* the natural environment.

However, the basic problems that led to the Deepwater Horizon disaster are not just isolated to a few companies or a specific industry. They can be seen in our culture and society as a whole. Over the past century, war and genocide have become more and more prevalent and destructive.<sup>xi</sup> The brutality we show towards one another is reflected in our brutality against the natural environment as we destroy forests, level mountaintops, drain estuaries, and erase barrier sand reefs in our quest for modern progress.<sup>xii</sup> In the short-sightedness of our “buy now, pay later” culture, we exchange moderation and sustainability for luxury, extravagance, and excess while we spend money that we do not have and increase our personal debt. This consumption mindset translates into the use and hoarding of the world’s natural resources without regard for our own future, let alone the needs of future generations. Our culture values ease of use and disposability. We throw away an estimated 60 million plastic water bottles each day.<sup>xiii</sup> Likewise, we view human life as disposable and throw-away: the U.S. aborts over 800,000 babies and disposes of an estimated 8,000 human embryos each year.<sup>xiv</sup>

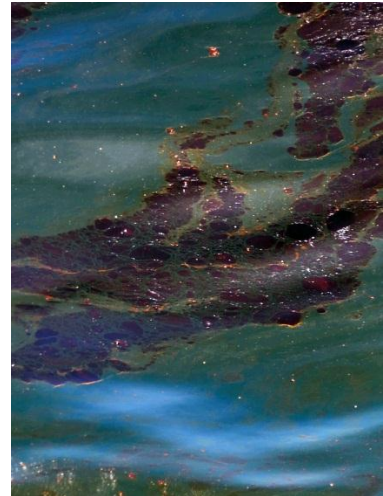
Clearly, something needs to change. Pope Benedict XVI explains, “What is needed is an effective shift in mentality which can lead to the adoption of new lifestyles in which the quest for truth, beauty, goodness, and communion with others for the sake of common growth are the factors which determine consumer choices, savings, and investments. Every violation of solidarity and civic friendship harms the environment, just as environmental deterioration in turn upsets relations in society.”<sup>xv</sup>

It is the Franciscan mission *to cure the wounded, to bind up the broken, and to recall the erring.*<sup>xvi</sup> Accordingly, we are called to minister to the wounded victims of this disaster, rebuild the broken human and natural ecologies, and recall the erring from their destructive mindsets and actions. What is needed today, as individuals, a nation, and a human family, is a conversion of heart, mind, and action that recognizes that *the way humanity treats the environment influences the way it treats itself, and vice versa.* St. Francis of Assisi had the unique insight of this relationship and manifested it in his words and deeds. Let us follow his example. To walk in the footsteps of Francis, who is the *alter Christus*, the other Christ, is to conform oneself completely into the likeness of Jesus Christ, He who *is the image of the invisible God*; to see the world through the eyes of Jesus; and to love the world as Jesus does, for *all things were created through him and for him and in him all things hold together.*<sup>xvii</sup>

Francis showed charity and concern for both humans and creatures.<sup>xviii</sup> He called all creatures by the name of *brother* and *sister* and preached the gospel of Jesus Christ to all creation: people, animals, and plants.<sup>xix</sup> This is a virtue that Francis came to develop over time. After all, *metanoia*, the conversion of heart, is an ongoing, lifelong process. The fruits of Francis’ conversion of heart and mind are manifested in his actions.

One great symbol of Francis' profound conversion is his embrace and kiss of the leper. As Francis explains in his *Testament*, "What had seemed bitter to me was turned into sweetness of soul and body."<sup>xx</sup> Consequently, Francis' embrace of the leper is the same embrace that Francis gave to the wolf of Gubbio. His gift of alms to the leper is the same gift of charity that he gave to animals in need.<sup>xxi</sup> His kiss of the leper's wounds is the same kiss of praise that he gave God through his creatures. And Francis' reconciling of the wolf and the townspeople of Gubbio is the same labor of reconciliation that Francis worked between the mayor and Bishop of Assisi. Clearly, Francis understood the relationship between humanity and the natural environment.

The one year anniversary of the BP Deepwater Horizon disaster falls on the Wednesday of Holy Week. I find the opening verses from the day's first reading very appropriate, "The Lord God has given me a well-trained tongue, that I might know how to speak to the weary a word that will rouse them. Morning after morning he opens my ear that I may hear; and I have not rebelled, have not turned back" (Is 50:4-5). As we end our Lenten journey, let us be mindful of our transgressions against our brothers and sisters, both human and creature. As we remember the Passion of our Lord, let us commit ourselves to the ongoing conversion of our hearts and minds. And as we enter into the Easter Season, may we be renewed in the power of Jesus' resurrection as we work *to cure the wounded, to bind up the broken, and to recall the erring.*



U.S. Coast Guard. Courtesy of Visual Information Gallery:  
<http://cgvi.useg.mil>

I would like to close my reflection with a prayer for the eleven workers who died on the Deepwater Horizon, April 20, 2010, and for the consolation of their families and loved ones.

*Almighty and Good God, our faith in the resurrection of Jesus comforts us as we mourn the death of Jason Anderson, Aaron Dale Burkeen, Donald Clark, Stephen Curtis, Gordon Jones, Roy Wyatt Kemp, Karl Dale Kleppinger, Jr., Blair Manuel, Dewey Revette, Shane Roshto, and Adam Weise. May this passage be a reminder to us of our own mortality. Let it be a source of hope for us as we look forward to the day when we will be united with you and all your holy ones in the joy of eternal life. We ask this through the same Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.*<sup>xxii</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> National Commission of the BP Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill and Offshore Drilling. *Deep Water: The Gulf Oil Disaster and the Future of Offshore Drilling – Report to the President*. (January 2011): 173. <http://www.oilspillcommission.gov/final-report>. Hereafter DW.

<sup>ii</sup> John Roberts, "Oil Spill Victims Say Future Recovery of Gulf is Connected to Compensation Fund," Fox News, March 2, 2011, <http://www.foxnews.com/us/2011/03/02/oil-spill-victims-say-future-recovery-gulf-connected-compensation-fund/>.

<sup>iii</sup> Associated Press, "Florida Senate Passes Oil Spill Recovery Measure," Pensacola News Journal, March 16, 2011, <http://www.pnj.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=2011110316009>.

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<sup>iv</sup> Approximately 1,041 square miles, or 0.4% of the Gulf of Mexico Federal Waters, surrounding the BP Deepwater Horizon spill site remain closed to fishing as of March 31, 2011. NOAA Fisheries Service, [http://sero.nmfs.noaa.gov/deepwater\\_horizon\\_oil\\_spill.htm](http://sero.nmfs.noaa.gov/deepwater_horizon_oil_spill.htm).

<sup>v</sup> In fact, the Pensacola News Journal reports, “Hotel revenues in Escambia County soared 30 percent in February, boding well for the spring and summer tourist season.” Staff writer, “Hotel revenue soars in Escambia,” Pensacola News Journal, March 18, 2011, <http://www.pnj.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=2011110318009>.

<sup>vi</sup> NOAA reported that of the estimated 5.4 million barrels of oil spilled into the Gulf of Mexico, only 27% remained with 49% having evaporated and biodegraded, 15% having been contained, 5% burned off, and 3% skimmed. NOAA, “Deepwater Horizon MC252 Gulf Incident Oil Budget,” August 2, 2010, <http://www.noaanews.noaa.gov/stories2010/PDFs/DeepwaterHorizonOilBudget20100801.pdf>. Raloff, Janet, “Gulf Floor Tainted by Oily Deposits,” Science News, 179, no. 6 (March 12, 2011): 17.

<sup>vii</sup> Jonsson, Patrik, “Baby dolphin die-off in Gulf: Cold water, not oil spill, the culprit?” The Christian Science Monitor, March 4, 2011, <http://www.csmonitor.com/Environment/Wildlife/2011/0304/Baby-dolphin-die-off-in-Gulf-Cold-water-not-oil-spill-the-culprit>.

<sup>viii</sup> The National Commission’s report to the President concludes, “The well blew out because a number of separate risk factors, oversights, and outright mistakes combined to overwhelm the safeguards meant to prevent just such an event from happening. But most of the mistakes and oversights at Macondo can be traced back to a single overarching failure – a failure of management. Better management by BP, Halliburton, and Transocean would almost certainly have prevented the blowout” (DW, 90). “[...] What we nonetheless do know is considerable and significant: (1) each of the mistakes made on the rig and onshore by industry and government increased the risk of a well blowout; (2) the cumulative risk that resulted from these decisions and actions was both unreasonably large and avoidable; and (3) the risk of a catastrophic blowout was ultimately realized on April 20 and several of the mistakes were contributing causes of the blowout” (115). “[...] The company does not have consistent and reliable risk-management processes—and thus has been unable to meet its professed commitment to safety. BP’s safety lapses have been chronic” (218).

<sup>ix</sup> As reported by the National Commission, “Decision-making processes at Macondo did not adequately ensure that personnel fully considered the risks created by time- and money-saving decisions. Whether purposeful or not, many of the decisions that BP, Halliburton, and Transocean made that increased the risk of the Macondo blowout clearly saved those companies significant time (and money). There is nothing inherently wrong with choosing a less-costly or less-time-consuming alternative—as long as it is proven to be equally safe. The problem is that, at least in regard to BP’s Macondo team, there appears to have been no formal system for ensuring that alternative procedures were in fact equally safe” (DW, 125).

<sup>x</sup> Pope Benedict XVI. *Caritas in Veritate – Charity in Truth*, ¶ 51. Italics are preserved from the original document while bold is added for emphasis.

<sup>xi</sup> Genocide has plagued our world for the past century with the Armenian genocide (1915-1923), Jewish holocaust, or *Shoah*, (1941-1945), Roma and Sinti holocaust (1941-1945), Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970), Uganda under the rule of Idi Amin (1971-1979), Cambodia (1975-1979), “Red Terror” in Ethiopia (1977-1978), repression of indigenous peoples in Guatemala (1981-1983), *anfal* campaign against the Kurds in Northern Iraq (1988-1991), Bosnia-Herzegovina (1992-1995), Rwanda (1994), Democratic Republic of Congo (1998-2007), and Darfur in Sudan (1998-2007). McGill Centre for Human Rights and Legal Pluralism, [http://efchr.mcgill.ca/Genocide\\_en.php?menu=3](http://efchr.mcgill.ca/Genocide_en.php?menu=3).

<sup>xii</sup> Pope Benedict XVI remarks, “How many natural resources are squandered by wars! Peace in and among peoples would also provide greater protection of nature.” *Caritas in Veritate – Charity in Truth*, ¶ 51.

<sup>xiii</sup> Pat Franklin reports, “Health-conscious Americans are consuming water from disposable plastic bottles at a rate of more than 70 million bottles each day. [...] More than 60 million plastic bottles end up in landfills and

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incinerators every day – a total of about 22 billion last year.” Pat Franklin, “Down the Drain – Plastic water bottles should no longer be a wasted resource,” *Waste Management World* (May-June 2006): 62-5.

<sup>xiv</sup> The CDC reports, “A total of 827,609 abortions were reported to CDC for 2007 [...]; the abortion rate was 16.0 abortions per 1,000 women aged 15--44 years, and the abortion ratio was 231 abortions per 1,000 live births.” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “Abortion Surveillance – United States, 2007,” *MMWR Surveillance Summaries*, 60, no. 1 (February 25, 2011): 1.  
[http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/ss6001a1.htm?s\\_cid=ss6001a1\\_w](http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/ss6001a1.htm?s_cid=ss6001a1_w).

It is difficult to determine exactly how many human embryos are disposed of each year. A report issued by the Society for Assisted Reproductive Technology in 2003 reports that a total of 396,526 embryos are in storage in the United States as of April 11, 2002 with 8,840 embryos “awaiting destruction per patient request.” It is assumed that these embryo storage and destruction rates are consistent with 2010-2011 rates. David I. Hoffman, Gail L. Zellman, and C. Christine Fair, “Cryopreserved embryos in the United States and their availability for research,” *Fertility and Sterility*, 79, no. 5 (May 2003): 1066.  
[http://www.asrm.org/uploadedFiles/ASRM\\_Content/News\\_and\\_Publications/Selected\\_Articles\\_from\\_Fertility\\_and\\_Sterility/cryoembryos\\_may2003.pdf](http://www.asrm.org/uploadedFiles/ASRM_Content/News_and_Publications/Selected_Articles_from_Fertility_and_Sterility/cryoembryos_may2003.pdf).

<sup>xv</sup> *Caritas in Veritate – Charity in Truth*, ¶ 51.

<sup>xvi</sup> “He [Francis] used to tell them: ‘As you announce peace with your mouth, make sure that you have greater peace in your hearts, thus no one will be provoked to anger or scandal because of you. Let everyone be drawn to peace and kindness through your peace and gentleness. For we have been called to do this: to cure the wounded, to bind up the broken, and to recall the erring. Many who seem to us members of the devil will yet be disciples of Christ.’ ” *Legend of the Three Companions*, ¶ 58.

<sup>xvii</sup> Col 1:15-17

<sup>xviii</sup> “The holy man overflowed with the spirit of charity, bearing within himself a deep sense of concern not only toward other humans in need but also toward mute, brute animals: reptiles, birds, and all other creatures whether sensate or not.” Thomas of Celano, *The Life of St. Francis*, ¶ 77.

<sup>xix</sup> *Ibid*, ¶ 81.

<sup>xx</sup> St. Francis of Assisi, *The Testament*, ¶ 3.

<sup>xxi</sup> Illustrating an example of Francis’ charity to animals, Thomas of Celano writes, “In the winter he had honey or the best wine put out for the bees so that they would not perish from the cold.” *The Life of St. Francis*, ¶ 80.

<sup>xxii</sup> The prayer is taken from the Common for the Dead in *Franciscan Morning and Evening Praise*: 1276.