



Franciscan Action Network

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

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Canticle of the Creatures and Climate Change

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One of my favorite writings by St. Francis is the *Canticle of the Creatures*. The Canticle speaks of the interconnectedness of all creation and our dependence on God for all that we are, have and will be. If the Canticle is viewed through the lens of ecology, it is even more remarkable. St. Francis wrote the Canticle with the knowledge of the interrelationships between the elements, ecosystems and the wildlife that inhabit them. The song of praise starts with Sir Brother Sun and works downward praising all the elements until it reaches Sister Mother Earth. The last two stanzas address the need for forgiveness, gratitude and humility. The most amazing thing about the Canticle is that almost 800 years have passed and it is still relevant for us today. When we view climate change through the lens of the *Canticle of the Creatures*, we find insight into the issue of climate change and answers on how to address it.

The *Canticle of the Creatures* praises through all the elements of creation. Written in the Umbrian dialect, the word “through” can be translated in three ways; “by,” “through” and “with.” Each individual creature praises God by doing and being what God intended so the ecosystems are healthy, in balance and productive. United with one voice, we praise God with all the creatures in all the ecosystems of the earth. This unity is a most wonderful praise and thanksgiving to God. When earth’s praise is united with the entire universe, the praise of God is amazing. St. Francis demonstrates this by starting with Sir Brother Sun who provides the earth with light. St. Francis then moves downward to Sister Moon and the stars who praise God by night. Brother Wind is next, circulating air, clouds and weather around the globe, nourishing all life on earth. Sister Water comes down from the heavens in the form of precipitation, watering our planet and making it fertile and fruitful. Then St. Francis praises Brother Fire that burns from the ground, rising heavenward and lighting the night. Sister Mother Earth praises God by producing food, flowers, and herbs. All of these seven elements, earth, fire, water, wind, moon, stars and the sun are interdependent and work together in unity for the good of all creation.

The message of the *Canticle of the Creatures* becomes even more relevant today as our world is faced with the realities of climate change. As our economy becomes more and more centered on industry, our use of coal and oil increases. These fossil fuels were created by the decomposition of dead organic matter, which is high in carbon. When burned, these fuels release carbon dioxide in our atmosphere, which contributes to climate change. Warmer temperatures affect weather around the earth and the rate at which glaciers are melting. This melting causes the sea levels to rise, displacing people who live near the shore. Since glaciers are a large source of our fresh water, their melting into the sea jeopardizes our access to clean drinking water. When climate change is examined through the *Canticle of the Creatures*, we can see that it keeps the creatures, the elements of our earth, from doing and being what they were created for. It affects the rays of the sun, the ability to see the moon and stars and changes our weather patterns. All of these affect water from cycling throughout the earth as it has for centuries. Climate change affects all creatures living on the earth by changing their habitats. Some habitats become drier while others become wetter. Wildfires have increased in size and severity due to drier conditions. Some habitats experience spring earlier than ever before. Wildlife has to adapt or go extinct. Due to our increased use of fossil fuels, we affect all ecosystems on the planet, further demonstrating as in St. Francis’s Canticle that we are indeed interconnected with all of God’s creatures.

To those who do not agree that climate change is caused by our use of fossil fuels, I ask you one question. Does uncertainty release us from energy conservation? To answer that question, let us look at how our use of fossil fuels affects the balance of earth's ecosystems. Obtaining fossil fuels, the refinement process and converting these fuels into electricity damage the environment beyond repair. Wildlife habitat is destroyed, putting species at risk and adding more and more creatures to the Endangered Species List. More regulations are placed on businesses for compliance of the Endangered Species Act. Water quality is impacted by the mining or drilling of fossil fuels. Contaminants, sediment from erosion and destruction of streams occur when fossil fuels are obtained. The worst offender is the Mountain Top Removal Method for extracting coal. These issues are not localized, but felt throughout the watershed, the ecosystem and our entire planet. The impacts on human health should not be overlooked. Contaminants in well water and increased particulate matter in the air both affect people's health near sites where fossil fuels are mined, drilled and burned. With our healthcare system stressed to its limits, this is a significant factor in the cost of the use of fossil fuels.

Many believe that by lowering the environmental regulations, our economy would grow and become stronger. Lessening environmental regulations initially looks like savings and a boost to our economy, but when further investigated, we see that it becomes a drain on our economy. Costs to the healthcare system, clean up of contaminated sites, investment in the Endangered Species Act, and expanding municipal water supplies due to contaminated wells are just a few of the hidden costs that put further strain on our economy.

We must not forget the last two stanzas of the Canticle that call us to pardon and forgiveness for the love of God. St. Francis wrote this stanza to help solve a political issue between the Mayor and the Bishop of Assisi. Climate change has divided our country on many levels. It has become a debate pitting liberals against conservatives and environmentalists against big business. We are all affected by the degradation of ecological systems in our world today no matter what our affiliation. It is a time to put our differences aside and solve the issues instead of getting side-tracked on arguments that do not solve the issues, but skirt around them only to divide us further.

When the Canticle was sung to the Mayor and the Bishop, they put aside their finger pointing and name-calling and solved their dispute. To address the issues of climate change, we must do the same. Negative comments, disrespectful jokes, and over-embellishing the facts run rampant on both sides of the issue. As Franciscans, we are called to be peacemakers and unifiers. If we are truly serious about addressing climate change, we must discourage the divisive language that is so prevalent in the media and refuse to take part in this form of disrespect of our fellow human creatures.

The one thing that we all hold in common is our mortality. St. Francis blesses those that are found following the holy will of God and admonishes us to praise, bless, thank and serve God with great humility. Through humility, we are able to see our contribution to the degradation of creation. Serving God in creation, we are challenged to decrease our individual use of fossil fuels, to move away from a materialistic way of life to one focused on God. Doing God's holy will calls us to look at the way we use energy. It took energy to make all the stuff that I have, adding carbon dioxide to the atmosphere. All the added electricity that I use by not turning off lights, by not using compact florescent light bulbs and other more energy efficient products adds to climate change. It takes prayer, and lots of it, to see and acknowledge our large footprints we make on this earth. When we begin to live sustainably, we can truly address the issue of climate change.

It is amazing how the Canticle is so relevant to us today. Almost 800 years have passed since Francis wrote it and still we have not understood its full meaning. God, we ask you to help us open our eyes this Lenten season to our impacts on all of creation and give us guidance on ways of living in right relationship with You, O God, one another and all creation.