

**MESSAGE OF THE INTERFRANCISCAN COMMISSION FOR
JUSTICE AND PEACE
ON THE 35TH ANNIVERSARY OF NAMING SAINT FRANCIS AS
THE PATRON SAINT OF ECOLOGY**

In 1979 Pope John Paul II named Saint Francis of Assisi the “heavenly patron of those who promote ecology.” On the 35th anniversary of this significant event, we, the members of Romans VI, the Interfranciscan Commission for JPIC, are sending this reflection to you, our sisters and brothers throughout the world. Together with you, we hope to deepen our understanding of what it means to call Francis the patron of ecology, and to explore the responsibility we inherit, as followers of Francis, to care for creation as its stewards. We are also happy to share with you a few examples of Franciscans who are striving to live the implications of this event in our world today.

We offer special thanks to Keith Warner OFM. His article “Retrieving Saint Francis: Tradition and Innovation for our Ecological Vocation” (in Tobias Wright, ed., *Green Discipleship: Catholic Theological Ethics and the Environment*, Winona, Minnesota: Anselm Academic, 2011, pp. 114-127. <http://webpages.scu.edu/ftp/kwarner/Fran-WarnerRetrieving.pdf>) was very valuable in preparing this present reflection, and made the task much easier.

Francis and Ecology

Our founder Francis is widely acclaimed as the pre-eminent exemplar of Christian care for creation. In this age of ecological crisis, scientists, leaders of other faiths, those who profess no faith, diverse scholars and ordinary believers have named Francis as their inspiration. Why does Francis have such broad appeal?

First, we can point to Francis’ passionate and sensory love of all creation as God’s handiwork. His profound appreciation of the beauty and goodness of creation filled him with even deeper love and gratitude for God, the source of such abundant blessing and diverse fullness.

Second, Francis experienced God’s presence in creation. Francis intuited that the “natural” both points to, and participates in, the “supernatural.” He sensed that the God who became flesh in Jesus Christ is still, and always will be, enfleshed in the world. In other words, Francis’ vision of creation was both sacramental and incarnational. Francis thus offers us a creation-affirming alternative to an approach that overemphasizes the “stain of original sin.” He reminds us of the intrinsic, enduring goodness of creation as both an outflow and home of God’s generative love. This awareness of Francis was echoed by John Paul II in his encyclical, *The Gospel of Life* (#83), that praises the “contemplative outlook” of “those who do not presume to take possession of reality but instead accept it as a gift, discovering in all things the reflection of the Creator and seeing in each person His living image.”

It is the *Canticle of the Creatures* that best conveys Francis’ own expression of his relationship with creation. Perhaps its most distinctive feature is the address of elements of creation as “brother” or “sister,” revealing how deep a connection Francis felt with the created world. He reveled in the sun, gazed upon the stars, danced with the air, was drawn to fire, marveled at water, and caressed the earth. The *Canticle* is a celebration of God’s love that is manifest in all creation and, in turn, reflected back in the praises of creation. It discloses Francis’ recognition of creation as an expression of God’s generous love. All created things are a sign and a revelation (sacrament) of the

Creator who leaves a divine imprint everywhere. As such, Creation has inherent value because it comes from God, not because of its material or instrumental value to humans. This is true ecological wisdom. Even more, the Canticle cannot properly be understood apart from Francis' love for Jesus Christ and his devotion to the Incarnation and Passion. The humility of God, that led God to enter creation, infinitely ennobled all of creation.

Third, Francis modeled a path of contemplative action. His prayerful grappling with the pain of the marginalized, such as the leper, moved him to act with compassion. He thereby mediated and embodied God's ongoing love toward the ever-present risen Christ, still "hidden" in the scorned and rejected.

Francis' dedication to living the Good News of Jesus Christ, wedded to his passionate love of creation, gave birth to a compelling religious and ecological consciousness that linked social justice with ecological justice. He strove for just relations not only between human beings, but with other creatures and with the earth itself—even to the point of "obedience... to every beast and wild animal as well" (A Salutation of the Virtues 14).

Francis' vision and life continue to nurture a perennial ecological wisdom: that human beings, individually and collectively, can live good lives in fraternal relationship with each other and the earth. Properly understood, his spiritual-ecological witness can unite all those of good will to participate together in broader efforts to create a more sustainable society (thereby responding to "the cry of the poor") and ecosphere (thereby responding to "the cry of the earth").

Recent Catholic Responses to Ecology

Catholic concern for the environment was solidified by Pope John Paul II's World Day of Peace Message for 1990. So great was the impact of this document that it effectively ended debate about whether Catholics should be concerned about the environment and shifted the discussion to how Catholics should express their care for creation. While most conventional environmentalists point to unbridled industrial growth and flawed public policy as agents of our ecological crises, John Paul II challenged all people to recognize an even deeper cause of these ills: our sin, selfishness and lack of respect for life. He argued that it is from our disordered understanding of what it means to be human—in relationship to God, to our fellow human beings and to creation—that so many of our ecological crises flow.

John Paul II urged greater openness to Gospel values as one means of making ecologically-wise choices. He also outlined ethical duties of human individuals and institutions on all levels: for the nations of the world to cooperate internationally in the management of the earth's goods; for individual nations to care for their citizens; and for individuals to undertake an education in ecological responsibility for themselves, for others and for the earth. Finally, he reminded Catholics of "their serious obligation to care for all creation," expressing the "hope that the inspiration of Saint Francis will help us to keep ever alive a sense of 'fraternity' with all those good and beautiful things that Almighty God has created."

In the last years of his life, John Paul II more explicitly linked ecological concern with the principles of Catholic Social Teaching. Human flourishing was as vitally important as the biological and physical flourishing of creation. The "cry of the earth" could not be separated from the "cry of the poor". His life-long affirmation of the importance of the principle of "solidarity," with its recognition of inescapable human interdependence, proved quite compatible both with Francis' vision and with a wider ecological consciousness.

Attention to human ecology was a central concern of the teaching of Benedict XVI. He wrote: “The Church has a responsibility towards creation and she must assert this responsibility in the public sphere. In so doing, she must defend not only earth, water and air as gifts of creation that belong to everyone. She must above all protect humankind from self-destruction” (Caritas in Veritate, n. 51). He also noted that: “Alongside the ecology of nature, there exists what can be called a “human” ecology, which in turn demands a “social” ecology. All this means that humanity, if it truly desires peace, must be increasingly conscious of the links between natural ecology, or respect for nature, and human ecology. Experience shows that disregard for the environment always harms human coexistence, and vice versa. It becomes more and more evident that there is an inseparable link between peace with creation and peace among men” (Message for World Day of Peace 2007, n. 8).

Catholic concern for care of creation has continued with Pope Francis. He has noted that this is “not just something God spoke at the dawn of history,” but rather something that God “entrusts to each of us as part of his plan.” Pope Francis has also spoken of finding in his namesake continuing ecological inspiration: “It helps me to think of the name of Francis, who teaches us profound respect for the whole of creation and the protection of the environment, which all too often—instead of using for the good—we exploit greedily to one another’s detriment.” Together with Popes John Paul and Benedict, Pope Francis clearly detects moral failure at the heart of the environmental crisis. And he warns that such moral blindness, if left uncorrected, will be costly indeed: “Whenever we fail to care for creation and for our brothers and sisters, the way is opened to destruction and hearts are hardened.”

Ecology and the Retrieval of Religious Traditions

Most environmental teachings in the world’s major religions took shape long before humans ever had the capacity to cause our contemporary environmental problems—in other words, before modern environmental ethics were needed. Moreover, amid the ethical resources that religions preserve through their traditions, some are problematic from an environmental perspective—such as belief in the total superiority of humans vis-a-vis other creatures, or the presumed need to reject the world as somehow inferior, or an impediment, to communion with the divine.

Traditions, rather than being static treasures to be defended, are living memories and values and ways of being to be shared from one generation to the next and further developed in new contexts. Re-presenting tradition becomes especially challenging when confronting new problems. In particular, “retrieving” tradition for contemporary religious environmental ethics requires multiple steps:

- Of the multiple elements in a religious tradition spanning millennia, which should be selected for retrieval? This requires great discretion, since some elements of a tradition should be left in the past, while others can still be quite helpful for inspiring action today.
- In light of our ecological crises, how should we reinterpret these elements, explaining their meaning for an age of ecological crisis? Francis loved creation, but he was not an “environmentalist” in the modern sense. Thus, Pope John Paul II needed to reinterpret Francis’ life as a medieval person in a way that allowed him to become a model who helps us foster greater ecological consciousness today.
- How can these processes renew religious identity more generally? This requires thinking critically about which values we want to animate us today, and identifying examples from our past that continue to help us in our journey into the future. It also requires engagement

with new developments, such as science. Ecological scientific knowledge is an essential component of any environmental ethic today. Thus renewal is necessarily innovative: it entails synthesizing the past with present knowledge to create new solutions to our problems.

Weaving together the responses to these questions is nothing less than a vocation that addresses pressing needs of the world today. Ecological problems will not be resolved only by individuals or individual actions. Rather, a collective re-visioning of our humanity is needed. Francis' vision, accurately retrieved, is a powerful witness to what the Catholic and Christian tradition can contribute to a renewed vision of humanity in relationship with nature. Every religious tradition must actively undertake such retrieval efforts to help address our modern environmental crises. But, when all is said... it must also be done! The authentic answer to these questions will consist not merely in data, nor only in good intentions, but rather in the practice of living one's spiritual life with a commitment to ecological integrity.

Pope John Paul II urged humanity to fulfill its "ecological vocation" to care for the earth. In so doing, he fused a classic term from Catholic spirituality (vocation), with something quite new (ecology). In thus linking tradition with innovation, he invites us to integrate the wisdom resources from our Catholic tradition with contemporary scientific tools for understanding the ecological consequences of our foolish and irresponsible treatment of the earth.

The example from Catholic tradition of St. Francis of Assisi can inspire us to respond to the cry of the earth with love, compassion, and generosity. While we should not seek to mimic a medieval man in our vastly different, modern context, nevertheless we can still look to his example as we formulate our own vocational responses to the environmental crises of our modern world. A contemporary vocational response can still draw insight from Francis' example of ecological consciousness. But we will need to develop a new synthesis that wisely combines his religious inspiration, along with the best scientific information, into a new moral vision. In this way we will "retrieve" and helpfully transmit our tradition to an age of ecological crisis.

A Sampling of Franciscan Ecological Initiatives

Francis was a hope-filled man. He inspires us to have realistic hope based on the belief that people, motivated by God's Spirit, will respond in sufficient numbers to begin the healing of the planet. The greatest hope for change is not the threat of disaster but the Gospel message that there are alternatives to the blindness, greed and competitiveness that cause so many disasters. We conclude this reflection, then, with some practical considerations to strengthen our efforts and a number of concrete examples where Franciscans are currently seeking to translate the ecological awareness of our founder into actions that address the ecological crises that we face today. May they serve as inspiration to the entire Franciscan family and beyond!

Practical Considerations

The effort to address our environmental crises must be grounded in a practical wisdom that will convince people of the need to act now, and provide them with practical suggestions/principles for the work. Three basic practical considerations that ought to be part of our Franciscan approach are:

Reality of Limits: In the light of today's environmental crises and the growing awareness of the limits of the earth, how can Francis' love of Lady Poverty guide us? Authentic "ecological conversion" cannot ignore the glaring inequality between north and south, or regional habitat destruction, both of which deprive parts of creation of essential living conditions and/or space. A

two-pronged response is needed: more frugal living and the implementation of national and international legislation to protect life in all its forms.

Sustainable Societies: As fraternal living was essential to Francis, it is probable that he would favor the idea of “a community of communities.” Our societies need to become more decentralized—a counter-trend to today’s increasingly globalized economy. There is need for increased focus on bio-regions: empowering local communities to assume responsibility for providing their own basic needs. This involves making communities more self-sustaining and less reliant on goods (especially food) and services (energy) from abroad. It may entail policies such as abolishing restrictions on trade, raising tariffs on imported goods and encouraging local agriculture.

Liturgy: As the source and summit of all Christian life (LG 11), and as the only contact most practicing Catholics have with the Church, Sunday Eucharist is a privileged moment for making Christians aware that ecological justice is a life-or-death “sign of the times.”

Concrete Examples of the Franciscan Response:

For a number of years the worldwide Franciscan Family has been searching to strengthen and make ever more concrete our commitment to ecology and environmental justice. The following eleven examples are a sampling of what is being done.

1. **Participation at the United Nations Rio + 20 Conference:** In June 2012 sixty (60) Franciscans, representing all parts of the family, were in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, to attend the environmental conference Rio + 20, sponsored by the United Nations. The delegation was organized by Romans VI (the group of JPIC directors of the Franciscan Family). A small group, led by Franciscans International (the Franciscan NGO at the United Nations), participated in the official congress. The larger part of our delegation participated in the People’s Summit, a parallel event that dealt with the same issues as the official congress but was open to all civil society. Franciscan delegates attended many of the programs offered at the congress and at the summit, seeking contacts among those in attendance with values and concerns similar to ours. During the last two days in Rio, the delegates met together to strategize about future common actions. As a result they accepted three proposals that are currently being implemented:
 - Acknowledge the impact of our lifestyle on the environment and seek ways to make necessary changes.
 - Address the issue of mining and its impacts which are being raised by Franciscans throughout the world; collaborate with the JPIC promoters in Rome to prepare and administer a survey on the impacts of mining, followed by actions to deal with the problems uncovered.
 - Participate in the campaign “Say NO to the Green Economy”, which works to expose the tactics of companies and projects that pretend to promote a green economy.

(See the addendum to this reflection for the final report on Franciscan participation at Rio; it provides some practical and helpful strategies for work in this area.)

2. **Rio +20 follow-up:** For global development policies to be effective, they must take into account the specific needs and interests of marginalized and vulnerable populations in the world’s developed, developing, and least developed countries, particularly those living in poverty. While sustainable development is generally seen as responsible and just, it is a concept that gives rise to much debate and is more complex than it may at first seem. In taking a holistic look at development policies, the following questions arise: what are the concrete realities behind so-called development? Who truly reaps the benefits of development projects?

And what are their real costs for the environmental and for local communities? Without getting bogged down in specialized terms, Franciscans International has produced a booklet to help understand what is meant by sustainable development. It provides keys to decipher current debates (including the Rio +20 Conference and its follow-up) that will lead to important decisions on a global level and, eventually, practical change in local communities. See full text of new FI Booklet on Rio +20 follow-up and on key environmental issues at:

http://franciscansinternational.org/fileadmin/docs/Environment/FI_20booklet_Development-Sustainable_20for_20whom_Nov_20.2013_final-EN.pdf

3. Right to Water: Franciscans International is engaged in addressing the right of people to have access to water, especially for the marginalized. The work involves various activities. One of them is publication of a Practical Guide on the Right to Water (Full text: http://franciscansinternational.org/fileadmin/docs/Water_manual/FI_WL_The_Right_to_Water_and_Sanitation_a_practical_guide.pdf);
4. Another is a series of workshops in Nairobi and Geneva, and an Advanced Training Workshop in Vanderbijlpark, South Africa, held last November 2013. The Vanderbijlpark workshop was attended by Franciscans from Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Malawi, Zimbabwe, Zambia and South Africa. The group discussed key issues including states' accountability for the protection of the right to water, with an emphasis on the most vulnerable, such as people who live in poverty in rural and urban areas. Representative of the Catholic Parliamentary Liaison Office and JPIC of the Southern African Catholic Bishops Conference talked about their advocacy work with policy makers. The Damietta Peace Initiative shared its view on the link between peace and access to water. FI's Geneva team was in attendance to outline the use of relevant United Nations human rights mechanisms with a view to contributing to the realization of the right to water. The final outcome document of the workshop is the **Vaal Water and Sanitation Declaration**, which sets forth a just approach to water issues focused on the needs of the most vulnerable. While recognizing the achievements of some African governments to guarantee this fundamental right, the declaration calls for further empowerment and involvement of local communities in the provision of their own water services, and protection from the commercialization of these services. An appeal is made to faith communities to stand with and support those who are deprived of their rights (Full text: http://franciscansinternational.org/fileadmin/docs/Water_manual_/The_20Vaal_20Water_20and_20Sanitation_20Declaration-2.pdf).
5. Sunshine House of Indonesia: This initiative, spearheaded by Br. Samuel Onton Sidin, OFM Cap (winner of the Kalpataru Award, the top environmental prize in Indonesia), is promoting high-profile reforestation and conservation programs, especially in the Kabu Raya District. Tall trees have been planted and "go green" activities have been introduced to the area. Sunshine Home, a prayer center for local Catholics, has been opened and is promoting initiatives to protect the environment while offering Christian worship and Franciscan spirituality. One reforested area was a 90-hectare area of Mt. Tunggal in the Benuah Mountains in the year 2000. This area had been devastated by a large brush fire of suspicious origins. Rare indigenous trees on the verge of extinction were planted and a feeding area for birds created.

Franciscan Earth Corps (USA): Launched in September 2013 by Franciscan Action Network (FAN), this initiative is a network of young adults (aged 18-35) who are engaged in projects to care for God's creation and to work for justice. The program integrates action with

contemplation. It provides spiritual formation in the Franciscan tradition (emphasizing social and ecological justice, Franciscan spirituality, community and simple living) while initiating local sustainable-living projects, along with grass-roots organizing for climate change. This new program is being adapted for use in parishes, colleges and religious orders.

6. Third Continental Meeting of JPIC of the Americas, Quito, Ecuador, November 2011: Seventy-nine (79) Franciscans (friars, sisters and Seculars) met to explore the theme of “Environmental Justice and the Challenges of Amazonia.” Experiences of insertion in Amazonia were shared along with scientific and theological conferences. The assembly agreed upon five (5) central priorities intended to respond to the challenges of Amazonia:
 - incarnation through insertion leading to personal and fraternal conversion
 - prophetic spirituality that is liberating and fosters environmental justice
 - presence and fraternal witness in mission
 - collaboration and networking
 - formation

From these priorities flowed specific recommendations for the Amazonia mission.

7. Youfra of Bosnia has organized “A Day for Ecology,” an annual one-day program to educate young Franciscans about the importance of keeping our environment clean. Saint Francis is highlighted as one who admired and cared about everything created. Each year this activity takes place in a different city of the region, and YouFra members clean that city and plant new trees. In Croatia, Franciscans had a big influence on the decision made by the Adria Society not to build a pipeline through Croatia. They had wanted to do so, but OFS and YouFra, together with the organization “Green Ones,” succeeded in stopping this planned action.

8. Since 2010 the regional Secular Franciscan Fraternity in Boma, Democratic Republic of the Congo, has supported a project that promotes both care for creation and the fight against poverty. The project is an initiative of Jean Bosco Noel Nkodia OFM and a team of biologists from the Network of African Women for Sustainable Development (REFADD). It works to protect the Mangrove Marine Park located on the Atlantic coast of the DRC, at the estuary of the Congo River. It also works to protect the manatees from indiscriminate hunting by the local population. These goals are achieved by the creation of a series of ponds that provide sufficient fish and wood, thus eliminating the need to cut down the mangroves or to kill the manatees.

9. The parish of St. Theresa Church in Arakonam is located in south India near Chennai. The town has a total population of 200,000, of which only 10,000 are Christians. We have been cooperating with secular groups and it has been a rewarding experience. In this age of global warming and climate change our parish members joined together to care for the earth by employing some innovative models to respond to the ecological crisis. We have developed six models and christened them “Domestic Spirituality Models”. They are easily practiced by members of the faith community as well as those of the secular community. The models we have developed in our parish are: eating locally, shopping locally, marrying locally, praying locally, staying locally and eating vegetarian. The models are already employed with faithfulness and responsibility by our members and the community is reaping the rewards. This success story shows what a faith community can do when it merges with the secular community to create a better future for our children’s grandchildren.

10. Franciscans International advocates at the UN in partnership with Franciscans around the world to address cases of environmental injustice or to improve national policies for protecting people and the planet. FI has also been very active in the follow-up process to Rio+20 currently taking place at the United Nations. One of the most important Rio+20 outcomes was that all 193 countries agreed to launch an inter-governmental process to design a new set of global “Sustainable Development Goals.” The SDGs—still being debated—are expected to be adopted in 2015 and will shape environmental, economic, and social policies for years to come. Through its joint ministry at the UN, the global Franciscan family has an important voice before decision-makers to urge care for Creation, promotion of the common good, and solidarity with communities that most affected by unjust policies and environmental abuses. FI engages government representatives and UN agencies and regularly speaks before the Human Rights Council in Geneva and the General Assembly SDG process in New York. All Franciscans can join FI’s efforts and call on their representatives to play their part in designing a global agenda based on Franciscan values: one that respects the dignity of every person, that promotes the equitable sharing of resources and that protects and sustains the environment.

11. The National OFS Fraternity of Uruguay has partnered with Franciscans International and other national organizations to advocate for sister water following a crisis in Montevideo in March 2013 where residents were shocked to see their tap water coming out cloudy brown with a pungent odor and taste. Contamination of the Santa Lucía River basin, the main water source for 50% of Uruguayans, caused this crisis. The incident revealed systemic problems in the government’s management of fresh water resources and potable water services. The OFS National Fraternity partnered with FI to study the problem and draft recommendations for policymakers to better protect freshwater resources and to prioritize water uses for human health over industrial uses. The Franciscans brought together a diverse group of civil society organizations for these ongoing efforts. In June the Franciscan coalition submitted a detailed report to the UN. They have brought these recommendations to foreign diplomats in Montevideo and through FI were able to send a representative of the fraternity to Geneva to advocate for these recommendations in the run-up of Uruguay’s upcoming review on its human-rights record.

Addendum

Final Document of Franciscan Delegation to Rio + 20 Conference

Fifty-six members of the Franciscan Family from around the world met in Brazil from June 15 to 23 (2012) at the Rio + 20 United Nations Conference, and at the parallel People’s Summit. We also spent time together to prepare common proposals for the Franciscan Family, and to find concrete ways to implement these proposals. Participants crafted the following short document to help disseminate news about our activities at Rio + 20, and to encourage the Franciscan Family to become ever more involved in responding to the current crises that we face in today’s world:

In the opinion of many we stand at a critical moment in Earth’s history. Social, environmental and economic crises call for an assessment of the current situation, and for discovery of effective ways to promote responsibility to one another, to the greater community of life, to future generations and to our planet. As followers of Saint Francis, the patron saint of ecology, we are called to understand deeply the world in which we live and to nurture life in fullness for all of God’s creation.

The Franciscan Family has recently decided to highlight the issue of environmental justice.

As part of our common effort, a group of about sixty (60) Franciscans met in Rio de Janeiro during the People's Summit and the Rio +20 Conference of the United Nations. Our delegation included those who participated in the official events of the United Nations, led by a team from Franciscans International (our Franciscan NGO at the United Nations), and those who participated in the parallel events at the People's Summit. Together we studied and reflected on some of the basic themes, including sustainability, human and environmental rights, spirituality, poverty, indigenous people, green economy, and others. We worked to share our values and vision for a better world with the others who were gathered at these meetings. As Franciscans we have a common vision of the human person, of society and of nature. Our Franciscan heritage enables us to share our ethical concern for healthy relationships with all of creation, focusing especially on the marginalized.

We reflected on our different realities and local needs. In the course of our discussions it became clear that our local problems are intimately related to the global reality. Consequently we decided, as members of the international Franciscan family, to prepare proposals that we might implement together. While local and regional groups will continue to work on their own specific issues, we committed ourselves to the following three proposals, to be implemented by the global Franciscan family:

1. Promote authenticity of lifestyle.
2. Participate in the mining project of the JPIC promoters in Rome.
3. Continue the campaign No to the green economy, denouncing the problems raised by the green economy and seeking alternative paradigms for society.

All three proposals should seek to:

1. Prepare formation materials (including basic definitions), and offer formation opportunities for our brothers and sisters and for those with whom we work.
2. Create a series of talking points on a new paradigm for society from a Franciscan perspective.
3. Deepen awareness of our Franciscan spirituality, which includes a concern for creation. Prepare and/or share prayers/celebrations on these themes.
4. Work with persons who are knowledgeable in the areas being addressed.
5. Denounce violence perpetrated against the marginalized.
6. Create and/or strengthen networks within the Franciscan Family and with other organization and movements of civil society.
7. Encourage the Franciscan Family around the world to become involved in advocacy efforts for public policy.
8. Cooperate with groups that already exist.
9. Make a special effort to work with the grassroots.

ST. FRANCIS – ST. CLARE AND ECOLOGY

The spirituality of Francis and Clare is a strong motivation for the Franciscan family to become thoroughly involved in efforts to deal with the current environmental crisis. This booklet helps us to understand the situation in which we live. Our spirituality reminds us of the moral imperative to address the crisis that threatens our planet and all its inhabitants.

The Franciscan tradition highlights a special concern and responsibility for our mother Earth and for all of Creation, arising from our desire to follow in the footsteps of Francis and Clare. Francis was named patron of the environment by John Paul II in 1979 for a reason. He did not confront the same questions that we do, and the environment in his time did not face the same global threats. But his approach to the world and his relationship to nature point us in the right direction.

St. Francis of Assisi

Unlike the common spirituality of his time, Francis did not separate the spiritual world from the material world, and he certainly did not devalue the material world as godless. He viewed the world, the earth, and everything in nature as God's creation and a place of incarnation – the presence of God. Referring to everything around us as creation adds a sacred dimension to our reflection on the environment. Francis related to all created things – living or not – with great respect and sought to be subject to them. This attitude was different from a spirituality that sees human beings as rulers of the earth. Francis did not see human beings as above or outside of the rest of nature. He saw them as co-creatures of God, as sisters and brothers of all creatures. He expressed his spirituality uniquely and poetically in the Canticum of the Creatures (see <http://www.appleseeds.org/canticum.htm>) at the end of his life. The canticum does not praise God for creation. Francis did not stand next to nature to thank God for nature. Rather, he stood in line with the community of creatures and – as part of that community – praised God as the source of all life and of all creation. The creatures' praise of God consists in their being what they are – that they become what they were created to be.

That is what differentiates Francis's spirituality from a concern for the environment which only relates to the future of humankind. For Francis, environmental protection comes from a deep respect for and consciousness of interior solidarity with everything that God has created. He knew about the unity of the entire cosmos. St. Paul said that the community of Christians forms the body of Christ, that the joys and sufferings of each individual member contribute to the well-being and suffering of the entire body (cf. 1 Cor 12:12-31; Col 1:18; 2:18-20; Eph. 1:22-23; 3:19; 4:13). For Francis, the same truth applies to the entire cosmos. Today we can see the confirmation of the truth of his insight in scientific reports. Destruction in one part of the world is leading to suffering in the entire world.

The respect and solidarity of Francis toward creatures are manifest in interior and practical attitudes of obedience. Through the vow of obedience a religious hands him or herself over completely to God through the mediation of another person. Francis extends this concept to include subjection to every human being and to all animals, whether wild or tame. He offers a theological reason for this subjection: obeying the creatures, one obeys the Creator from whom they come forth and who allows each one to be, to act and to express its own needs.

Francis also values and loves creatures because they respond positively to the divine will written into nature itself, faithfully fulfilling the tasks entrusted to them. In this way, the relationship that men and women have with individual members of the universal "community of life" helps them to

be more “human,” in the sense that they are urged by the creatures to carry out the specific human vocation which they have received, just as the creatures carry out their own vocation.

For this reason, Francis tries to see life from the perspective of these creatures, to understand their vital needs. His attitude is one of deep empathy, which prompts him to look for suitable ways to defend or reconstruct the environment according to the developmental needs of each living being. We see here a concern not only for individual creatures, but an invitation to care for the habitat, to protect the integrity of the ecosystem, thus guaranteeing the interrelationships that ensure survival.

Rivalry and the attempt to abuse and to dominate do not make sense. Human beings and other creatures are made to care for and help one another, thus realizing the good for which God has created them. Without creatures we would not be able to live, says Francis.

Where there is no perception of threat, there is no fear. We see that the creatures obey Francis because he comes before them unarmed, not looking to profit from his dealings with them. He looks rather to further their life, and is willing to pay for their promotion and liberation with his own flesh. This is what happens, in different ways, with the wolf of Gubbio and with the lambs in the Marches. Francis demonstrates relations that promote reconciliation and that bring all together in mutual obedience. These relations allow all to be themselves and to praise God. Friendship, even tenderness, always wins out, as in the case of “brother fire.” It was used to cauterize Francis’ eyes, but did not bring pain.

St. Clare of Assisi

Clare also offers perspective and encouragement, thanks to her sensitivity and to her relationship of faith with “the most high and good Lord” and “with all the creatures.” She walked the same path as Francis. Who is Clare, if not the “little plant of the most blessed father Francis”? She defines herself in this way, and sees Francis both as the farmer who planted and cultivated her – thanks to whom she was able to find her life-giving environment – and as the root through which she is nourished. For Clare, there was no problem to compare herself to a vegetable! In the same spirit Francis recognized himself in the chicken that dreamed, and his friars in the chicks that surrounded him.

When Clare gazes upon creation, it is not from on high to that which is down below. Rather, it is the gaze of a “sister,” of esteem, sympathy and solidarity. It presumes a way of interacting which respects and promotes the other. Clare invites her sisters to gaze upon that which lives all around them. They should see that they are in a vital relationship with the trees, with human beings and with all other creatures. This relationship is a mutual giving and receiving, and provides that which is necessary for existence. All participate together in the gift of life, allowing each creature to be authentic, to be seen and accepted in its uniqueness. There should be no question of trying to take control, therefore, but rather a glorious celebration of life. This attitude guarantees the integrity of each living being in its own seasonal rhythms, which are characterized by flowers, leaves and fruit, by the passage of months, of years. There should be no strains or violence against nature in its cycles of life. We need to pay attention to these cycles, to see them and to hear them, learning to synchronize our breathing and the beating of our heart, so as to maintain the harmony of the universal community.

Clare speaks of praise as a suitable means for creating right relations with other creatures. It is an explicit praise that joins with the praise which exists in every living being by the simple fact of its existence, of having received the creative breath. The beautiful and the good are in each one. And praise, “the ecological principle of divinity” (W. Wink), bears each one to the light. Aware of

her own place in the cosmos, and grateful for it, Clare is content that the tree is a tree, that a human being is a human being, that each creature is that which it is!

Clare lived for 42 years in the monastery of San Damiano, but fought until the end of her days for the "Privilege of poverty," for not being forced to accept possessions from which the community would receive an income for its support. Today we would classify her relationship with the earth as "sustainable." In her Testament she recommends that the sisters not acquire or accept land "except for the smallest parcel needed for a garden to cultivate vegetables." The earth is the sister and mother which sustains us and feeds us; so it should not be exploited for ends determined by human egocentrism. For this reason Clare declares that if the land which protects the isolation of the monastery is greater than that necessary for a garden, the part not needed for the garden should not be cultivated. She is not interested in maximizing economic benefit, but rather in guaranteeing the common life of all the creatures called, each according to its own species, to praise the Creator.

As the Ministers General of the Franciscan Family recalled in their letter on the occasion of The Spirit of Assisi, "The relationship between humankind and nature, according to the design of God, and rediscovered and proclaimed by Francis (and, we would like to add, by Clare) is a relationship of use and not ownership, respect and not exploitation."

In 1989 John Paul II invited the youth gathered in Germany to say yes to life, to all living things and to nature, noting that such an attitude would unite us with all people of good will in the care and protection of the environment and all natural values. We have a common destiny and find in God completion and our final end as 'a new heavens and a new earth'. When we live in a way that respects all creatures and that is conscious of the unity of all creation, we cannot remain indifferent to the environmental footprint that we leave behind.

The biblical story of the miraculous feeding of the 5,000 can provide encouragement as we confront our present crisis. The disciples looked at the large crowd of people much like we look at the environmental situation today. How can so many be satisfied with so little? What can be done? It was for this reason that the disciples wanted to send the crowd away. But Jesus did not release them from their responsibility. He asked what they had available, and highlighted what they were able to do. Only then was the miraculous feeding possible. The same miracle can occur in response to this ecological challenge. We must understand the situation and start with that which is possible. We must encourage others to do the same. This will allow us to build momentum toward societal solutions to the crisis. Persistence and faithfulness in the task will lead to success.