

Care For Creation: A Franciscan Spirituality of the Earth ***Pamela Wood***

Today, discover Christ in his most distressing disguise, the face of the poor. These words, scribbled on a chalkboard, greeted me as I entered the mother house of the Missionaries of Charity for early morning Mass. As a young woman, my heart was grateful for such titbits of wisdom and guidance. I could sense that they were written by one who had seen, and deeply felt, the plight of those whom I was encountering every day in my volunteer work - the poor on the streets of Calcutta. Mother Teresa's words cut right through my questions and need for understanding, reminding me to re-ground myself in love and faith. I discovered that I could tap into my Catholic tradition to help me grapple with the challenges of a painful and unjust world. This lesson was profoundly formative to my faith.

Now, fifteen years later, I find myself grappling with similar overwhelming feelings - confusion, fear, despair, urgency. News of our global climate crisis is terrifying enough, but the impending devastation it threatens for the poor and the voiceless among us - humans and non-humans alike - is unspeakably heartbreaking. As the plight of our earth seeps ever deeper into my consciousness, the heaviness often feels unbearable. What is a Christian to do in the face of all this? Again, I turn to the spiritual resources available to me. As a layperson deeply inspired by the life of Saint Francis of Assisi, it made sense to turn to our patron saint of ecology. Could his example teach me anything about how to approach the plight of our ailing planet? What would Francis do?

I must admit that I encountered frustration when I first began to seek answers to these questions. In my desperation, I wanted literal examples of what Francis (or any of our saints) did to save our water or dying species; how he managed to motivate the type of large-scale societal changes we need in order to avert our climate crisis. But I found none, for when Francis lived 800 years ago, he encountered no systemic ecological crises - these are a relatively new phenomenon, born of our industrialized society. Yet, once I surrendered my desperation and delved more deeply into the stories from the life of Francis, I did find profound guidance for navigating these troubling and scary times.

While Francis often withdrew from the world for reflection, and for communing with God and creation, his was not a spirituality of escape from the world's problems. Rather, this stepping back allowed him to engage in contemplation -to take a penetrating look at the world as it truly is. If Francis contemplated his beloved creation today, he would still revel in joy at her beauty. But he would also encounter his Sister-Mother Earth bruised and broken, groaning under the weight of our voracious consumption levels, and our modern-day view of her as what Macey and Brown describe as "supply house and sewer". He would see his Brother Wind and Sister Water polluted and desecrated, the creatures he loved endangered, some gone forever. He would encounter the poor of this world, too, suffering the most from ecological destruction. Indeed, he would encounter Creation crucified - at our hands. This is a truly terrifying

reality -never before has one species, one child of the universe, inflicted such damage on its very own life support system and so many of its brother/sister creatures.

Following in the footsteps of Francis here is a daunting task. How is it possible to look upon the reality of our world unflinchingly and with eyes wide open? Surrounded by bad news on all sides, it is quite natural to look away and avoid the sobering truth. In fact, this 'deadening of our response' may be the biggest threat of all - for at this moment in history we cannot afford to look away. It helps me to remember that there was a time when Francis, too, looked away. Early in his life, he actively avoided the lepers who lived in his town. Perhaps their plight was too much for him to bear, so he adopted the cultural messages of his time, joining in the collective "looking away" from the lepers by society. But once his heart was converted by the love of their common Creator, his encounter with the leper transformed him - he found the path of right relationship. Can we follow Francis' example and contemplate the ugliness of global climate change and the harsh truth of our part in it? Can we confront our collective looking away from creation dying in our midst? What keeps us from taking action to heal and, with Francis, restore right relationship in our world?

Consider the story of Francis' vocational call. Upon contemplating the crucifix at San Damiano, he heard this call: "Come, rebuild my *oikos* - my house - which, as you see, is falling completely into ruin." Initially, Francis understood these words to mean he should restore one particular chapel. Later, he realized God was calling him to transform the larger Church of his time. Contemplation required of Francis a much harder task than anticipated, spurring him on to confront corruption and injustice and to initiate important institutional and societal reforms.

Today, if we were to contemplate our crucified earth, as Francis did the cross, might we not hear the same words within an even larger context? "People - come rebuild my *oikos* - my house of creation -which, as you see is falling completely into ruin." Rooted in Francis' deep love for all God's creation, are we not called to follow his example and begin, stone by stone, action by action, to rebuild, protect and restore our God-given home?

Herein lies the contribution we modern-day Franciscans can make to our environmental crisis. This call to "rebuild the *oikos*" is a call to conversion in the deepest sense. It will require us to do our own interior work: aligning our spiritual practice and daily habits with those of right relationship with the earth. In my own spiritual life, and in my work as a spiritual director and retreat facilitator, I seek to integrate such a Franciscan spirituality of the earth. I use tools such as guided meditations, an ecological examination of conscience, and experiential group activities to help participants rediscover their deep connection to Creation, and to unblock their despair and powerlessness about our world. Facing such difficult realities offers surprising effects, much as it did for Saint Francis. Most participants find that the courageous work of Franciscan contemplation unleashes a strong and creative capacity to protect our family of creation. They discover, too, that this demanding path of

Franciscan spirituality is more easily done within a community context. Their converted hearts nudge them further along their own paths of engaged action: inspiring them to join together with their faith communities to reflect upon the more challenging questions, and commit to concrete actions, such as reducing their ecological footprint upon creation.

A Franciscan spirituality of the earth is not a path for the faint-hearted! Francis' example always calls us to extend beyond our own personal conversion. As he worked to transform the church of his day, even Francis saw that he must give up any notion that he could go it alone. This path of conversion required that he call his brother friars together to engage issues in broader society. In our day, restoring right relationship with creation will also be a social and community venture. Have we heard this call? How can we bring this call to "rebuild the oikos" into our everyday conversations with friends, co-workers, fellow parishioners, and our lawmakers? If it were easy, we would have begun a long time ago! But following the example of Francis, and with hearts ignited with God's love, we Franciscans can begin to walk the gratifying but difficult path of ecological conversion - to co-create God's house anew. *f*

Pamela Wood is an art therapist, spiritual director and retreat facilitator in Portland, Oregon, USA. She is co-author, with Ilia Delio, OSF, and Keith Warner, OFM, of Care for Creation: A Franciscan Spirituality of the Earth, published February 2008 by St. Anthony Messenger Press. Some of the tools for empowering people to act on their theology of creation are to be found in this book. The article above includes quotations from, Coming Back to Life: Practices to Reconnect Our Lives, Our World by Joanna Macy and Molly Young Brown (Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers 1998).