

## Franciscan Ecological Wisdom

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### **Our Common Planetary Home**

Sunday, May 17, 2020

*To mark the fifth anniversary of his encyclical Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home, Pope Francis has declared May 16–24 "Laudato Si' Week." [1] The Daily Meditations this week will focus on how Franciscan spirituality impels us to act in response to "the cry of the Earth and the cry of the poor." I must admit that I am often discouraged by the minimal efforts most Christians are willing to make to care for the earth, even at this critical juncture. The pandemic has shown our willingness to make sacrifices—at least to some degree—to protect our fellow humans, but we have not shown that same willingness to make even small changes to protect or heal the earth. I hope that will change!*

*Father Joshtrom Isaac Kureethadam, a theologian who has studied and written extensively about Laudato Si', urges us to heed the warnings of both science and our conscience:*

Today, our common planetary home is falling into ruin. We are on the brink of an unprecedented global challenge regarding the sustainability of our common home, which places a question mark on the future of human civilization. . . .

In the second chapter of the Gospel of John, there is a verse that the disciples attribute to Jesus as he drives out money lenders and sellers of sheep and cattle from the temple of Jerusalem: "Zeal for your house will consume me" [John 2:17]. Prior to that verse Jesus tells those who are despoiling the holy place: "Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" [John 2:16]. . . .

Today, we could, and probably we should, understand this house as our common planetary home. It is this common home which is being despoiled and desecrated today. Significantly, our common home is also God's own house, permeated by the Spirit of God from the dawn of creation, where the Son of God pitched his tent in the supreme event of the incarnation. It is in this common home that God co-dwells with humanity and of which we have been entrusted with stewardship, as we read in the book of

Genesis [2:15]. The contemporary ecological crisis, in fact, lays bare precisely our incapacity to perceive the physical world as impregnated with divine presence. We have swapped the lofty vision of the physical world as God's own abode, sanctified by the incarnation of the Son of God, with the one-dimensional mechanistic outlook of modernity. Accordingly, the physical world gets reduced to a mere storehouse of resources for human consumption, just real estate for market speculation. . . . Through pollution of the planet's land, air, and waters, we have degraded our common home that is also God's own home. We have turned this sacred abode into a marketplace.

In a situation of planetary emergency like the collapse of our planetary abode, we need to be aflame once again with the zeal for our common home.

### **Pope Francis and St. Francis of Assisi**

Monday, May 18, 2020

*I deeply appreciate the many ways Pope Francis has continued the work of Vatican II by letting in the "fresh air" of modern science and other disciplines. While new information is one of the primary ways we come to understand Reality and God more fully, that doesn't mean we can reject the past. Alongside the excellent scientific evidence offered by *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis also honors my own spiritual father, St. Francis of Assisi, the patron saint of ecology.*

10. I do not want to write this encyclical without turning to that attractive and compelling figure, whose name I took as my guide and inspiration when I was elected Bishop of Rome. *I believe that Saint Francis is the example par excellence of care for the vulnerable and of an integral ecology lived out joyfully and authentically. [My emphasis here and below. —RR]* He is the patron saint of all who study and work in the area of ecology, and he is also much loved by non-Christians. He was particularly concerned for God's creation and for the poor and outcast. He loved, and was deeply loved for his joy, his generous self-giving, his openheartedness. He was a mystic and a pilgrim who lived in simplicity and in wonderful harmony with God, with others, with nature, and with himself. He shows us just how inseparable the bond is between concern for nature, justice for the poor, commitment to society, and interior peace.

11. . . . [Francis'] response to the world around him was so much more than intellectual appreciation or economic calculus, for to him each and every creature was a sister [or brother] united to him by bonds of affection. This is why he felt called to care for all that exists. His disciple Saint Bonaventure tells us that, "from a reflection on the primary source of all things, filled with even more abundant piety, he would call creatures, no matter how small, by the name of 'brother' or 'sister.'" [1] Such a conviction cannot be written off as naïve romanticism, for it affects the choices which determine our behavior. If we approach nature and the environment without this openness to awe and

wonder, if we no longer speak the language of fraternity and beauty in our relationship with the world, our attitude will be that of masters, consumers, ruthless exploiters, unable to set limits on their immediate needs. By contrast, *if we feel intimately united with all that exists, then sobriety and care will well up spontaneously*. The poverty and austerity of Saint Francis were no mere veneer of asceticism, but something much more radical: *a refusal to turn reality into an object simply to be used and controlled*.

12. What is more, Saint Francis, faithful to Scripture, invites us to see nature as a magnificent book in which God speaks to us and grants us a glimpse of his infinite beauty and goodness. “Through the greatness and the beauty of creatures one comes to know by analogy their maker” (Wisdom 13:5); indeed, “his eternal power and divinity have been made known through his works since the creation of the world” (Romans 1:20).

### **Cultivation Not Domination**

Tuesday, May 19, 2020

St. Bonaventure (1221–1274) taught that “Christ, as a human being, shares with all creatures; indeed he possesses being with rocks, lives among the plants, senses with animals, and understands with angels.” [1] In saying this, Bonaventure wanted to give theological weight to the deep experience of St. Francis of Assisi (1181–1226), who as far as we know, was the first recorded Christian to call animals and elements and even the forces of nature by familial names: “Sister Mother Earth,” “Brother Wind,” “Sister Water,” and “Brother Fire.”

We cannot jump over this world, or its woundedness, and still try to love God. We must love God *through, in, with,* and even *because of* this world. This is the message Christianity was supposed to initiate, proclaim, and encourage, and what Jesus modeled. We were made to love and trust this world, “to cultivate it and take care of it” (Genesis 2:15), but for some sad reason we preferred to emphasize the statement earlier in Genesis, which seems to say that we should “dominate” the earth (1:28).

Although God “empties himself” into creation (Philippians 2:7), we humans have spent most of history creating systems to control and subdue that creation for our own purposes and profit, reversing the divine pattern. As Paul Swanson, co-host of my podcast *Another Name for Every Thing*, puts it, “The [Franciscan mystics] are known

for their celebrated connection to being a part of nature and this world as a mirror to which we pass over to God. There's such a naturalness to this perspective, yet the bulk of Christianity has seemed to pay no mind to this at all with the theology of domination over the planet." [2]

Franciscan sister and scientist Ilia Delio writes that Francis modeled a way of relating to creation with inherent dignity and equality rather than domination:

[Francis] did not consider himself at the top of a hierarchy of being nor did he declare himself superior to the non-human creation. Rather, Francis saw himself as part of creation. His spirituality overturned the spirituality of hierarchical ascent and replaced it with a spirituality of descending solidarity between humanity and all of creation. [3] . . . He found God in all creatures and identified with them as brother and sister . . . "because he knew they shared with him the same beginning." [4] By surrendering himself and daring everything for love's sake, the earth became his home and all creatures his brothers and sisters. That led him to love and respect the world around him and made him truly a man of peace.

Only prayer, the Spirit of God breathing in us, dwelling in our hearts and joining us to Christ, can lead us, like Francis, to the contemplative vision of God's goodness in every creature and in every living thing. . . . The God within us is the God who permeates every aspect of our world—the One who is the source and goal of creation. [5]

### **God is Being Itself**

Wednesday, May 20, 2020

The Franciscan philosopher and theologian John Duns Scotus (1266–1308), whom I studied for four years in seminary, wrote that "God first wills Christ as his supreme work." [1] In other words, God's "first idea" and priority was to make the Godself both visible and shareable. The word used in the Bible for this idea was *Logos*, which was taken from Greek philosophy, and which I would translate as the "Blueprint" for reality. *The whole of creation*—not just Jesus—is the partner in the divine dance. Everything is the "child of God"—no exceptions. When you think of it, what else could anything be? All created beings must, in some way, carry the divine DNA of their Creator.

Without a sense of the inherent sacredness of the world—in every tiny bit of life and death—we struggle to see God in our own reality, let alone to respect reality, protect it, or love it. The consequences of this ignorance are all around us, seen in the way we have exploited and damaged our fellow human beings, the dear animals, the web of growing things, the land, the waters, and the very air. It took until the twenty-first century for a pope to clearly say this, in Pope Francis' prophetic document *Laudato Si'*. May it not be too late and may the unnecessary gap between practical seeing (science) and holistic seeing (religion) be fully overcome. They still need each other.

Franciscan mysticism has an *incarnational worldview*, which is the profound recognition of the presence of the divine in literally “every thing” and “every one.” It is the key to mental and spiritual health, as well as to a kind of basic contentment and happiness. An incarnational worldview is the only way we can reconcile our inner worlds with the outer one, unity with diversity, physical with spiritual, individual with corporate, and divine with human.

What we see in Franciscan mystics, again and again, is a joyful and unitive consciousness that intuits and experiences what Duns Scotus called “the univocity of being.” By this, Duns Scotus meant that we can speak with *one consistent and true voice* about a rock, a tree, an animal, a human, an angel, and God! They all participate in the one same state of Being to varying degrees, and *Deus est Ens*, he often wrote: “God is Being itself.” This eliminates any clear distinction between the sacred and the profane, because Christ existed in matter from all eternity (Colossians 1:15–20; Ephesians 1:3–11), ever since God decided to materialize and reveal who God is through creation. It is summarized on our Franciscan coat of arms by the Latin phrase *Deus Meus et Omnia*: “My God and All Things!”

## **Loving God by Loving the World**

Thursday, May 21, 2020

*I have often wondered what might compel more Christians to take personal responsibility to mitigate climate change. With all the scientific evidence we've been given, it doesn't seem to be a head issue but a heart one. Scholar Sallie McFague (1933–2019) offers both theological and ethical reasons for us to make some much needed changes at an individual level. She writes:*

As St. Augustine [354–430] puts it, sin is “being curved in upon oneself” [1] rather than being open to God. In our ecological age, we now see that being open to God means being open to the other creatures upon whom we depend and who depend upon us. We do not meet God only in Jesus of Nazareth, because God is also incarnate *in our world* as the universal Christ. . . .

To love God by loving God’s world has meant different things to different people in different times. For us . . . it is epitomized by climate change . . . the central crisis of the twenty-first century. Put simply, climate change is the result of too many human beings using too much energy and taking up too much space on the planet. Through excessive energy use and its accompanying greenhouse-gas emissions, we are changing the planet’s climate in ways that will make it uninhabitable for ourselves and many other species. . . .

This is a strange “crisis” to face: It does not have the immediacy of a war or plague or tsunami. Rather, it has to do with *how we live* on a daily basis—the food we eat, the transportation we use . . . the luxuries . . . [and] long-distance air travel we permit ourselves. We are not being called to . . . fight an enemy; rather, the enemy is the very ordinary life we ourselves are leading. . . . Yet, for all its presumed innocence, this way of life lived by well-off North Americans [*and prosperous people in other countries —RR*] is both unjust to those who cannot attain this lifestyle and destructive of the very planet that supports us all.

What, then, would be [an appropriate] ethic for twenty-first-century people and especially for well-off, religious people? One of the distinguishing characteristics of many . . . religions is some form of self-emptying. Often it takes the form of ego-lessness, the attempt to open the self so that God can enter. . . . In the Christian tradition, *kenosis* or self-emptying is seen as constitutive of God’s being in creation, the incarnation, and the cross. In creation, God limits the divine self, pulling in, so to speak, to allow space for others to exist. . . . In the incarnation, as Paul writes in Philippians 2:7, God “emptied the divine self, taking the form of a slave,” and in the cross God gives of the divine self without limit. Likewise, one understanding of Christian discipleship is [as] a “cruciform” life, imitating the self-giving of Christ for others. . . .

Could we live and move and have our being in the universal Christ, participating in the insight and power of God incarnate in the world as we deal with . . . the basics of existence—space and energy—so we can live in radical interdependence with all other creatures? We are not alone as we face this challenge—the universal Christ is in, with, and for the world as we struggle to deal with climate change.

*Summary: Week Twenty*

## Franciscan Ecology Wisdom

*May 17 - May 22, 2020*

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*Saint Francis, faithful to Scripture, invites us to see nature as a magnificent book in which God speaks to us and grants us a glimpse of his infinite beauty and goodness. — Pope Francis (Monday)*

*We cannot jump over this world, or its woundedness, and still try to love God. We must love God *through, in, with,* and even *because* of this world. (Tuesday)*

*Without a sense of the inherent sacredness of the world—in every tiny bit of life and death—we struggle to see God in our own reality, let alone to respect reality, protect it, or love it. (Wednesday)*

*For all its presumed innocence, this way of life lived by well-off North Americans is both unjust to those who cannot attain this lifestyle and destructive of the very planet that supports us all. —Sallie McFague (Thursday)*

*We're the only creature who can decide not to do something we're capable of doing. That's our superpower, even if we exercise it too rarely. —Bill McKibben (Friday)*