

The Franciscan Theology of the Environment

What is the Franciscan Theology of the Environment?

Since Francis was not a highly educated man, he did not write a systematic theology (a theology concerned with summarizing the doctrines of a religion), but he did have a theology strongly rooted in sacred scripture. He taught his theology through letters, sermons, songs, and, most of all, his life which makes his theology accessible to almost anyone, so anyone who chooses can lead a Franciscan lifestyle.

Francis believed that God is good. Creation, because it is a primary revelation of God, must therefore also be good. Stated another way, creation is the visible sign of the invisible God—it is sacramental and sacred.

For reflection:

1. As you begin this study of Franciscan theology of creation, spend time considering your attitude toward creation? Do you agree with Francis? Disagree? Why?

How do you honor other people as made in God's image?

How do you fail to honor others?

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Session One

This view is very clear in Genesis 1:31: ***“God looked at everything he had made, and he found it very good.”***

At the time of Francis, a Neo-Platonic view of the world was popular. The world was seen as having a hierarchy of being; Neo-Platonists believed that one must transcend this world and move to the spiritual dimension because God was found only in the spiritual realm, not in the created one. Francis' theology contrasted with Neo-Platonism. He revered each aspect of creation, from the smallest creature to the mighty sun. He believed that each reflected a unique aspect of the Divine.

In Psalm 148, the writer encourages all of creation, not just human persons, to praise the almighty Creator. Creation praises God just by being, by shining forth its own individual beauty. This duty to reflect the abundance of the divine is an honor, graciously granted by God.

Psalm 148: 3-10

**Praise him, sun and moon;
Praise him all you shining stars.
Praise him you highest heaven,
and you waters above the heavens.
Let them praise the name of the Lord,
for he commanded and they were created;**

**He established them forever and ever;
He gave them a duty which shall not pass away.**

Francis also believed that human beings were the pinnacle of creation, made in the very image and likeness of God.

Gen. 1:26 reads, ***Then God said: Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and the cattle, and over all the wild animals and all the creatures that crawl on the ground.***

“The human person resembles most closely the model (the Word) that God uses to create. Since the Word is to come among human beings as one of them, they resemble the Word very exactly” (Short 113).

“Who are we as human beings? Rooted in the earth yet created in the likeness of the one who is the divine Likeness, we are destined to embody something of the divine Word in our own individual life.” (Hayes from *Franciscans Doing Theology* 136)

For reflection: What unique aspect of God might you radiate?

Think about someone you do not like. How might that person embody the Divine?

Who, for you, seems to truly live as an image of God? Why did you choose that person?

Sit quietly and observe nature without judgment. Notice what it says to you.

Even though the human person is the pinnacle of creation, all of creation is included in God’s covenant with the world. Francis saw all aspects of creation as his brothers and sisters, not only as things to use and care for. The prophets Isaiah and Micah hint of this connection in their personification of the mountains, the trees, the hills, and the foundations of the earth.

Isaiah 55:12 ***Yes, in joy you shall depart, in peace you shall be brought back; mountains and hills shall break out in song before you, and all the trees of the countryside shall clap their hands.***

Micah 6:1-2 ***Hear, then, what the Lord says: Arise, present your plea before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice! Hear, O mountains, the plea of the Lord, pay attention, O foundations of the earth.***

Francis regarded creation as his family, as worthy to hear the word of God preached. According to one story, Francis preached even to birds about God’s glory. He also apologized to the birds for not having

done so sooner. Interestingly enough, the birds seemed to intuit something special about the event and remained there “listening.”

Another story tells that Francis admonished the emperor, for love of God, to decree that no one should trap larks and that all villages should scatter grain for the birds on special days.

Toward the end of his life, in excruciating pain, Francis still praised nature. For example, as a hot poker was placed on his forehead, as prescribed by doctors, he praised Brother Fire.

“My Brother Fire, which surpasses all other things in beauty, the Most High created you strong and beautiful and useful. Be kind to me in this hour; be courteous.”

Dawn Nothweir, in *Franciscan Theology of the Environment*, states that the earth is a closed space and that only sunlight comes from outside, so we are forever united (with all of creation) in one household, in kinship. We must live in harmony with creation in order to survive and to fulfill the end for which we were created—to live fully in Christ.

Franciscan theology is, according to Zachary Hayes, O.F.M., “a developing tradition, a common spirit, and a self-critical tradition. The Franciscan tradition is to be approached with “humility, authenticity, and mutuality” (*Franciscans Doing Theology* 43).

1John 1:1-2

**This is what we proclaim to you;
What was from the beginning,
what we have heard,
what we have seen with our eyes,
what we have looked upon and our hands have touched—
we speak of the Word of Life.
This life becomes visible;
we have seen and bear witness to it.**

For reflection:

You, too, are created in God’s image? How do you purposely care for and respect your spiritual, mental, physical and intellectual being?

The Canticle of the Creatures

**Most high, all powerful, good Lord,
Yours are the praise, the glory and the honor and every blessing,
To you alone, Most High, they belong
and no man is worthy to pronounce your name.**

**Be praised, my Lord, with all your creatures,
especially Brother Sun, who is day
and by him you shed light upon us.
He is beautiful and radiant with great splendor,
of you, Most High, he bears the likeness.**

**Be praised, my Lord, through Sister Moon and the Stars,
in the heavens you formed them clear and precious and beautiful.**

**Be praised, my Lord, through Brother Wind
and through Air and Cloud and fair and all weather,
by which you nourish all that you have made.**

**Be praised, my Lord, through Sister Water,
who is very useful and humble and precious and pure.**

**Be praised, my Lord, through Brother Fire,
by whom you light up the night;
he is beautiful and merry and vigorous and strong.**

**Be praised, my Lord, through Sister Mother Earth,
who sustains us and guides us,
and produces diverse fruits with colored flowers and herbs.**

**Be praised, my Lord, by those who pardon for love of you,
and endure sickness and trials.
Blessed are they who shall endure them in peace,
for by you, Most High, they shall be crowned.**

**Be praised, my Lord, through our Sister Bodily Death, from whom no
man living can escape. Woe to those who die in mortal sin.
Blessed are those whom she will find in your most holy will,
for the second death, will do them no harm.**

**Praise and bless my Lord and give him thanks
and serve him with great humility.**

A year before his death, when he was suffering terribly, Francis asked God for help. God replied, "As of now, you are as secure as if you were already in my kingdom." The next day, Francis, who saw himself as "one love-center in a universal brotherhood" (Nothweir 156), wrote the first part of the Canticle, which "shows an aesthetic appreciation for the things of creation delicately unfolding itself, born from the womb of the Sacred" (Delio et. al. 84).

Interestingly humans appear only in later verses in "the context of pardon and reconciliation; to be part of this song of creation, (humans) must pardon, forgive, and accept our own and others' weaknesses and to love all creations as they are" (Delio et. al.89). The separation humans suffer from creation as a result of sin, then, must be healed before all things can be one in harmony in Christ. Human understanding of creation has gone from survival of the fittest to a recognized need for interdependence for survival and peace.

Ilia Delio writes beautifully, "Forgiveness is an excess of goodness given to another for the sake of a new future (90). In a similar vein, Eric Doyle writes, "In loving we create and by creating we discover pathways to the future (Nothweir 157). How humbling it is to realize that God allows creatures to co-create.



1. In *St. Anthony Messenger*, Nov. 2009, Marianne Hieb, R.S.M. wrote of creating a Canticle Garden, "a patch of creation in which we intentionally recognize and celebrate aspects of the *Canticle* prayer, and the archetypal presences found there. It can be a window box, a planter, a backyard, a large field, or anything in between." Find or create your own Canticle Garden and allow it to teach you about the beauty of God's creation.
2. In the spirit of the "Canticle of the Creatures," think of someone you need to forgive and pray for the strength to do so.
3. Before we can accept and love others, we must accept and love ourselves. Are there aspects of yourself that you find difficult to accept and love? Bring that before God and ask for help in accepting yourself. Remember that you are truly made in the image and likeness of God, and that you are good.

Jesus as Center

The Christian God is Trinitarian, which means that God is interpersonal and relational; the three persons are in communion with one another. "This communion has as its center the Word, the core or middle of God's life as Trinity. Wishing to express overflowing goodness, God wishes to pour out an expression of the divine life. God's desire to share goodness is expressed as creation" (Short in Nothweir 113). Thus creation is a visible expression of God's goodness.

In the prologue to John's Gospel, the author acknowledges the Word of God as source, summit, and sustainer of all creation.

John's Gospel: Prologue

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came to be through him, and without him, nothing came to be. What came to be through him was life, and this life was the light of the human race; the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.

"God will actually give away even the very heart of divine life, the Word. Since the Word will be the crowning glory of creation, God makes...all the creatures, according to the Word as model, or blueprint, or form" (Short in Nothweir 113).

For reflection: God gives us God's very life. What does that say about God?

What does that say about us?

Sin Enters

Francis, in his *Second Admonition*, wrote that “the fall of humanity into sin had everything to do with the human desire to grasp things and use them in an arrogant and selfish way.”

Today the effects of this greedy use of creation are evident in the devastation of war, air pollution, hunger, water pollution, and so on. Instead of viewing creation as a reflection of God, many view it as a commodity to be used for individual profit and comfort. In this view, a few receive the greatest profit, while the many go without basic necessities.

Since every aspect of creation is sacred, to violate the goodness of creation is to violate the very goodness and generosity of God. Sin fails to recognize the intrinsic value of all of creation. God wills harmony and peace within creation. In sin, a choice is made to place the individual’s will above the divine will. This, of course, is idolatry, placing other gods before the true God; individuals mistakenly place their will above God, making themselves into false gods, into arbiters of good and evil.

Pope Benedict writes, “When man himself is out of joint and can no longer affirm himself, nature cannot flourish. On the contrary: man must first be in harmony with himself; only then can he enter into harmony with creation and it with him. And this is only possible if he is in harmony with the Creator who designed both nature and us. Respect for man and respect for nature go together, but ultimately both can flourish and find their true measure only, if in man and nature, we respect the Creator and his creation”

Reflection: In what ways do I place my will before God’s will?

Check out your ecological footprint at myfootprint.org

Are you pleased or dismayed by your footprint?

What steps might help shrink that footprint?

Reconciliation and Conversion

Reconciliation is a lifelong process in which persons invite in and allow God to change them, to make them more aware of the will of God, and to draw them closer to God. Anthony DeMello, S.J. writes that this process begins with awareness, with seeing that something about my attitudes, values, and behaviors needs to change (*Awareness*).

Francis' life illustrates reconciliation and conversion very well; he began as a fun-loving, carefree young man, concerned with pleasures, riches, and heroics in war. His conversion changed him into a devoted follower of Christ—one who radiated Christ in his every word and action. His last years were filled with great suffering, but he always kept his focus on Christ.

Francis' life and words speak of the conversion of the world, of hope for a world riddled by sin and injustice. Creation suffers terribly through human attitudes and behaviors. Healing will accelerate when human beings recognize, understand, and turn in obedience to God who desires harmony and love for all creation.

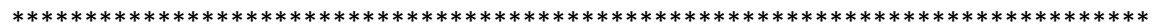
The Catholic understanding of the human person is one of good and optimism. Francis lived this understanding very well. He endured the realities of suffering, sickness, sin, and death, but each led him into closer communion with the Creator. He willingly lived the Paschal Mystery, the joy of life, the depths of suffering, the bodily death and the promised resurrection with Christ.



For reflection: Think of a time of suffering for you. Where did you notice God?

Spend time in awareness—notice life in the present moment.

In summary, the Franciscan theology of the environment is a celebration of God. Giving honor to all of creation is honoring God. Living this celebration can mend the rift sin has caused and restore peace and harmony to our world.



Recommended readings:

For a celebration of creation and simplicity:

Thoreau, Henry David. *Walden*.

Dillard, Annie. *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*.

For a more thorough understanding of the Franciscan theology of creation:

Delio, Ilia. *A Franciscan View of Creation: Learning to Live in a*

Sacramental World. NY: The Franciscan Heritage Series, Vol. 2, 2003.

Delio, Ilia, Keith Warner, and Pamela Wood. *Care for Creation*. Ohio: St. Anthony Press, 2008.

Nothweir, Dawn, OSF. *Franciscan Theology of the Environment: An Introductory Reader*. Quincy, Illinois: Franciscan Press, 2002.

Saggau, Elise, OSF, ed. *Franciscans and Creation: What is Our Responsibility?* NY: Washington Theological Union Symposium Papers, 2003.

Also mentioned:

DeMello, Anthony. *Awareness*. New York: Doubleday, 1990.

Websites of possible interest:

www.networklobby.org

www.catholicsandclimatechange.org

myfootprint.org

youtube.com

([“The Relevance of the Franciscan Tradition”](#)—a speech by Dawn Nothweir)