

A Reflection on the Keystone XL Pipeline
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Abstract—by Russell M. Testa

Professor Dawn Nothwehr, OSF uses the proposal to build a pipeline from Canada to refineries in Texas to develop the Canadian oil sand (shale deposits) for better commercial viability as the basis for how Franciscan-minded people might approach the larger challenges of living in relationship with creation in our modern world. She begins, as all good Franciscans do, by drawing from personal experience: hiking in the majesty of creation in Canada only to stumble onto the destruction of that same creation through the development of the oil sands. Sr. Nothwehr points out, in no uncertain terms, how the use of natural resources without appreciation for the complexity of the natural systems from which they are taken leads to “vicious cycles of denial and false hope.” “Imperial ecology,” which at its base is use without understanding of impact, is founded on the fallacy that “humans are the lords and masters over nature.” This view is fundamentally at odds with the wisdom of St. Francis of Assisi whose stance is kinship with all creation. The false hope rooted in “imperial ecology” draws its energy from fear and insecurity—which have classically been impediments to sound moral judgment.

As a way forward, Dr. Nothwehr offers the thinking of St. Bonaventure who developed theological categories for what St. Francis of Assisi taught about Christ, creation, creatures and humans. St. Bonaventure’s approach, *Imitatio Christi*—the imitation of Christ, is based in the hope of transformation of all things through the virtues of humility, poverty, obedience and love. When facing potentially great ecological destruction, as in the development of the tar sands, humility requires human action to be rooted in prudence and precaution. When we do not have a clear sense of the short- and long-term impact of our actions, and these actions involve distinct risk, we are called to act cautiously and deliberately so that we might preserve creation. Through poverty, we are reminded to lighten our footprint on the earth. Living in Christian simplicity would greatly reduce our energy needs and thus the demand for the development of the tar sands. Obedience enjoins us to listen, to hear the groans of creation and those suffering from ecological and economic destruction. Obedience, like humility, uses prudence to call into question our choices. If we listen to creation, we will ask ourselves if it is wise (prudent) to place a potentially leaky pipeline through our “breadbasket;” what we hear will help guide our moral compass. Sr. Nothwehr states, “In a time of food insecurity, record climatic warming resulting from fossil fuel use, and the disastrous safety record of catastrophic oil spills from pipelines, prudence and obedience call for a halt of this entire project.” Finally, all our actions must be rooted in love. We do not act solely from reason, but from a deep interconnection, born from relational love with all humans and creation, that compels us to act to save what is in harm’s way.

In the end, Professor Nothwehr concludes that if we use our Franciscan heritage, we are “required to act to stop tar sands mining and the Keystone XL Pipeline.” And in so doing – in doing what is ours to do, hope might sprout again.