

# Signs of the Times: Threats to Earth's Environment

by Sr. Marie Lucey, OSF | April 1, 2016 |



The essay below is the sixth in [a series of “Franciscan Response” reflections](#) by friars and partners-in-ministry about issues facing our culture. The series is part of Holy Name Province’s response to the call to revitalize Franciscan life and ministry in the United States – a key objective of the leaders of the American OFM provinces, who are evaluating ways to reconfigure Franciscan life in the United States.

*These reflections are meant to provide social analysis as part of the many considerations involved with creating a preferred future for the Franciscans of the United States. Because it is hoped that this initiative generates dialogue, friars are encouraged to provide comments about the content of this and all essays in the series. These essays do not represent the official policy of Holy Name Province.*

“Laudato Si’, mi Signore,” words that open the encyclical of Pope Francis on “Care for Our Common Home,” are new to much of the world, but familiar to Franciscans who have treasured St. Francis of Assisi’s “Canticle of Creatures” for more than eight centuries. “Praised be you, my Lord,” through our sisters and brothers in all of Creation, has inspired Franciscan prayer, song, contemplation and active care for creation for many years. Franciscans also know that this beautiful canticle was composed by Francis, not as he ran singing through fields of sunflowers, but from his bed of pain and near blindness when he was close to death.

For Franciscans, then, the encyclical poses a new challenge which is not only ecological and social, but theological and spiritual. Franciscans, especially, must make the connections, as Pope Francis does, between suffering Earth and suffering people, especially those who are poor and bear the brunt of ecological devastation and climate change.

## **Research and Teachings of Pope Francis**

In his encyclical, Pope Francis begins by describing “what is happening to our common home,” an alarming picture based on sound science and for which he is criticized by some with vested interests for going beyond the pale of a spiritual leader. But Francis has done his homework and gathered facts

that cannot honestly be disputed. In addition, whether addressing global warming, privatization of water, loss of biodiversity or the social impacts of economic inequality, Pope Francis never strays from a theology of creation in which “each creature has its own purpose” (per paragraph 84), and all creation exists in relationship to the Creator and thus to each other as brother and sister. He insists that “a true ecological approach *always* becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear both *the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor.*” (49)

Throughout his encyclical, Pope Francis draws on the teachings of his predecessors, frequently citing popes from Pope Saint John XXIII to Benedict XVI, as well as a number of bishops’ conferences of various countries including the United States, and the Catechism of the Catholic Church. He also credits several theologians and spiritual writers from Saints Bonaventure and Thomas Aquinas to Father Teilhard de Chardin. Although “Laudato Si” is the most comprehensive papal teaching addressing “integral ecology,” Francis positions it firmly in theological and spiritual continuity.

While Catholics and all people of good will are challenged by the encyclical, Franciscans have a special responsibility to read it, reflect on it, and act on it. Franciscans must lead the way in opening its richness to others, showing that while stewardship of Earth is good, it falls short in a world, a universe, a cosmos where everything is connected to everything else, and in which relationship is key to understanding our place in Creation.

### **Intuition of St. Francis**

“Everything is connected,” Pope Francis reminds us. “Concern for the environment thus needs to be joined to a sincere love for our fellow human beings and an unwavering commitment to resolving the problems of society,” (91) “Hence every ecological approach needs to incorporate a social perspective which takes into account the fundamental rights of the poor and the underprivileged.” (93)

Moreover, “In the Christian understanding of the world, the destiny of all creation is bound up with the mystery of Christ, present from the beginning: ‘All things have been created through him and for him,’” (Col. 1:16), so all elements of creation “which his human eyes contemplated and admired are now imbued with his radiant presence.” (100) “Integral ecology” embraces environmental and political action on behalf of Earth and human beings, especially those who are poor, and spiritual contemplation of God’s beauty and presence in Creation.

The spiritual intuition of Francis of Assisi was to recognize that since all creatures are created by a loving parent, all live in relationship to each other as brothers and sisters. His glorious Canticle of praise, composed in suffering, echoes down through the centuries, treasured by his followers, and now inspires another Francis to issue in time of ecological crisis, an encyclical urging us to care for our common home.



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