

# Franciscan Theology of the Environment:

AN INTRODUCTORY READER



EDITED BY

Dawn M. Nothwehr, OSF



Franciscan Press  
Quincy University

© 2003

## Get Him Out of the Birdbath! What does it mean to have a Patron Saint of Ecology?



Keith Douglass Warner, OFM\*

On Easter Sunday, 1980, Pope John Paul II named Francis of Assisi the patron saint of Ecology. Now that we have passed the twentieth anniversary of this event I would like to reflect on the implications of having a patron saint of ecology in the Catholic Church. I would like to believe that he would inspire us to address environmental issues seriously, to reflect on what it means to be people of faith in an age of ecological crisis. In this essay I would like to frame environmental problems through the lens of Christian Franciscan spirituality, and to offer some ideas on how we might want to address them. This essay does not pretend to be scholarly nor comprehensive. Rather, I wish to invite any person inspired by Francis to consider the spiritual and religious implications of being part of a Church having a patron saint of ecology. I have a formal relationship to St. Francis: as a vowed member of the religious fraternity that he started, I have a particular responsibility to manifest his spirituality and that includes giving witness to the love he had for all creatures. But one need not be a Franciscan friar or sister to be a Franciscan. The vast majority of Franciscans have always been and will continue to be ordinary men and women, inspired by the witness of the poor man of Assisi. Some lay men and women formally affiliate by

\* This article originally appeared as "Out of the Birdbath!! Following the Patron Saint of Ecology" in *The Cord* 48/2 (April 1998):74-85. This revised version of the work is reprinted with the author's permission.

becoming Secular Franciscans (formerly: the Third Order), but most simply look to him as an example. These are sometimes called “the fourth order.” Anyone can become a Franciscan simply by following Francis’ way of following Jesus; one need not join a vowed community to express his ecological vision of spirituality. Francis is perhaps Christianity’s most famous nature mystic, and his experiences can inspire us to act on behalf of God’s Creation.

I have noticed an odd disconnection between the difficult and practical struggle to defend the integrity of Creation and the majority of discussions that I have had with other Franciscans about these matters. When I listen to other Franciscans talk about nature, I often feel like I am looking at one of the nineteenth century paintings from the “American Romantic period.” These painters created quasi-fantastic landscapes inspired by the Western frontier. It is this kind of desire to “feel good” about nature that has led to so many insipid garden statues of Francis, inane presenting a birdbath. While I certainly prefer a beauty ethic to a perspective on nature that sees it only in terms of economic profit, I would like to invite anyone inspired by Francis to move beyond nature as something to look at and “feel good.” As a nature mystic, Francis savored his relationship with earth, moon, fire, water and living creatures, but to emotion he added solidarity, compassion, and action. I understand how overwhelmingly complex environmental issues can be, especially when science, statistics, and future projections are involved. I am not, however, content that Franciscans tend to see nature exclusively as a gift of beauty. I feel that we need to be able to face the distressing facts of our environmental crises and hold Creation’s beauty and the threats it faces in tension. The threat of tremendous human and non-human suffering is unprecedented, and yet Franciscans seem reluctant to commit time or resources to these concerns.

My question is: where are the Franciscans in the debate about the environment? Have there been any efforts to address environmental issues from a Franciscan perspective? Why have so few Franciscans, lay or religious, involved themselves in environmental issues? Whenever I tell non-Catholics that I am a Franciscan interested in promoting concern for Creation, I get strong responses along the lines of: “where have you been all these years? We’ve been waiting for the Franciscans to address these issues!” As a follower of the patron saint of ecology, I feel I have a responsibility to devote part of my life’s effort to following his example of loving Creation. I hope others would feel called to this min-

istry as well. I would like to use this essay to explore some ideas about how Francis might serve as a model for doing this.

### INCARNATIONAL SPIRITUALITY

The two major components of our task at hand are to construct a different theological lens for viewing nature and environmental problems, hopefully one that is authentically Franciscan, and to help those around us to realize that our environmental behavior is an expression of our spirituality. The first is perhaps an assignment of a more specialized nature, but it cannot stand alone. I will only be able to suggest a new direction we might want to move in this essay. In Francis’ writings and the historical sources of his life, we have evidence of his spirituality of nature. In addition, Bonaventure and Scotus developed the Franciscan theological tradition which emerged from their perspective and experience as Franciscans. As early Franciscans who built on Francis’ nature mysticism and mystical insight, they have provided important theological tools for helping us with this first task. A rationale helps provide a response to our crises that is both consistent and faithful.

Until the industrial revolution, the relationship between humanity and nature was much more simple, and inherited Biblical attitudes toward nature were sufficient to provide guidance in this area. The human-nature relationship is now far more strained and problematic than it ever has been, thanks in large part to the unprecedented power humans now have through technology. We need a theology or rationale for a more positive view of nature, one that assigns non-human Creation value and reins in the power of our technology. Until there is a broader awareness of the consequences of indifference toward the environment and there is consensus to value the survival of non-human creation over human convenience and greater consumption, we will not see noticeable improvement in the well-being of the earth’s natural systems. I believe that the Franciscan theological tradition can provide this.

I do not intend to articulate this theological vision here; I merely hope to point toward a direction that could help, and to challenge you, the reader, to reflect on the intersection of your spiritual practice and our ecological crisis. For many, Creation spirituality has provided a refreshing change from Christian theologies concerned exclusively with humans. Writers such as Thomas Berry, Matt Fox and Brian Swimme have argued for a reinterpretation of the creation story, one more posi-

itive and centered on the inherent goodness of creation. While there is much that I like about Creation spirituality, to me it seems a bit utopian, short on specific suggestions for how to address our problems. It is a vision for how human/non-human and human-divine relationships ought to be, yet it fails to adequately explain how to move in that direction. At times, Creation spirituality seems to be more concerned with rejecting major pieces of Christian theology than renewing it in a way relevant to the social and ecological problems we currently face.

I certainly appreciate Creation spirituality and I agree with many of its tenets. Yet as a person trained in Franciscan theology, I cannot accept Creation spirituality uncritically. While both Franciscan spirituality and Creation spirituality advocate a deep sense of relationship with nature, there are points of conflict between them, at least as these three men have articulated Creation spirituality. Two of the conflicts are over the person of Christ, and the means of reforming human behavior (which is based on our theological anthropology). I believe the Franciscan theological tradition has the insight and tools that can help connect the faith of ordinary Christians with the need to see the well-being of all of Creation as something in which God takes great interest. The increased importance placed on the incarnation of Christ unites Christocentric and Creation-oriented theologies.

Christocentrism has been a defining characteristic of Franciscan theology since Francis himself. By Christocentrism, I mean that Jesus Christ is the center of our theological understanding of the world. As Paul wrote in Colossians, “for in (Jesus) all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities—all things were created through him and for him” (Colossians 2:16). Francis opened the rule of life for his first followers insisting on the principle of “the teaching and footprints of our Lord Jesus Christ,” and this captures the essence of Franciscan spirituality. While I certainly agree with the need to broaden the focus of God’s saving activity beyond just the human species, I grow uneasy when I read theologies that fail to make any connection between Jesus and our relationship with nature or the material world. And I know that the majority of Catholic and Protestant Christians would be more open to an ecological theology if it were more clearly connected to the Jesus Christ they worship on Sunday morning.

## FRANCISCAN CHRISTOCENTRISM, REDEMPTIVE COMPLETION, AND THE COSMIC, ECOLOGICAL CHRIST

In some ways it is remarkable how succinctly the theology of the cosmic Christ in the Franciscan tradition addresses the need for an understanding of Jesus that lays a foundation for a greater valuation of the natural world. Through a Franciscan understanding of Jesus’ life and person, as interpreted by Bonaventure and Scotus, we can connect the Jesus-story with our contemporary needs to revalue nature. Their reflection on the mystery of the incarnation of Christ serves a portal into a more sophisticated understanding of God’s belief in the goodness of the created world. The incarnation marked a threshold in the relationship between God and humanity, and God and the whole created world. God chose to sacramentalize the world in a more profound and unprecedented way, to make the entire material world a vehicle for communion with God. This belief in the goodness of Creation has been present in the Franciscan tradition since Francis, but we now find ourselves in a social situation in which we need to give this belief even greater emphasis.

I am neither a philosopher nor a sophisticated theologian. Thankfully, we have two fine Franciscan systematic theologians who can help us. In his succinct essay on John Duns Scotus, *Incarnation, Individuality, and Diversity*, Kenan Osborne writes:

...Jesus, in his humanity, indeed sacramentalizes the finality of God’s whole world, a world in which human freedom and misfreedom (sin) exist. The whole world is sacramentalized, not just the “nice” part of it. The incarnation then begins, one might say, with the very first act of God *ad extra*—the first creative moment of our world. The incarnation is a process moving through the history of our created world, and with each subsequent step the meaning of the world, the finality of the world, the “why” of the world emerges to some degree in a clearer way. We are finding out more about the incarnation than ever before. It is an ascending experience. Like climbing a mountain, the higher one goes, the wider and broader one’s perspective. In the Jesus-event, a major revelation of the meaning of creation, the “why” of creation, takes place. This is what the world and its history are all about.<sup>1</sup>

This understanding of Incarnation is both deeply Christocentric and at

the same time embraces material Creation as good. Creation is sacramentalized in an even more profound way by the incarnation of Christ. God's generosity is expressed to us through Creation, and the incarnation of Christ builds on this.

Zachary Hayes has written very helpful works on Christology in the Franciscan tradition. In an article for *The Cord*, a Franciscan journal, he writes:

The cosmos, as Bonaventure writes, is the primal book of divine self-revelation. And the meaning of the cosmos is concentrated in humanity and radicalized in the person of Jesus Christ. Thus, the doctrine of the primacy of Christ points the believer to an understanding of the inherent meaning of the cosmos. There has probably been no period in history when this doctrine of the cosmic Christ was as important as it is right now....<sup>2</sup>

In Hayes' explanation of Franciscan Christocentrism, we are freed from the dilemma of being forced to choose between a creational theology and a redemption theology. Creation spirituality, as it has been commonly articulated, has been set in opposition to the need for human redemption. Hayes proposes Bonaventure's theory of redemptive completion as a way to integrate a positive appreciation of Creation and humanity's need for redemption.

Completion refers to the process of bringing creation to its God-intended end which is anticipated already in the destiny of Christ. Redemption refers to the necessary process of dealing with all the obstacles that stand in the way. Such a model could be easily related to the sense of an emerging cosmos as it appears to us today in the light of the sciences. This would allow us to create a larger framework of spirituality and theology which would have some resonance with the cultural images that have such a pervasive impact on the minds of our people.<sup>3</sup>

Thanks to these two contemporary theologians, among others, we can see that Jesus Christ is not irrelevant to our environmental problems. Although he was not a trained theologian, Francis had a profound insight into the love of God expressed through Creation. Francis, Bonaventure, Scotus and many others have preached a theology broad enough to embrace Jesus Christ of the Scriptures, our Christian tradition, and a theology of nature as inherently valuable and good.

## PENANCE IN AN ECOLOGICAL AGE

Francis also understood the human heart, and his prescription for its change was to do penance. He identified himself as penitent and chose to follow Jesus in this way. While our ecological situation may be quite different today, there are several key penitential values that point us toward what I believe would be a Franciscan response to environmental problems. Some of these values are: humility, expressed through poverty and simplicity; refraining from the excesses of technology; service to the poor; vulnerable, and marginalized; participation in the mystery of the Eucharist; and peacemaking.

Here again we see a clear contrast with Creation spirituality. Fox and Berry have both been criticized because they fail to take into account the difficulty of changing human behavior. Berry writes beautifully of the mystery and celebration of the vitality of life on our planet, and his prose is truly inspiring. Fox, like most Creation spirituality writers, is uncomfortable with the idea that human beings are fallen and in need of redemption, and he prefers an emphasis on "original grace." He suggests that the release of the "mystic child" within us will lead us to want to share our wealth and develop a respect for the Earth.

One of the major problems I have with Creation spirituality is that it fails to take into account the real brokenness and darkness in human nature due to sin. Compulsive greed and chronic indifference are the two greatest obstacles to a healthy relationship with Creation. I fault mainstream Christianity and Creation spirituality for failing to acknowledge that sin has an ecological dimension. We North Americans are grasping for so much wealth that it cannot possibly be sustained. Our society's lifestyle is robbing from the underdeveloped world and from nature's ability to restore herself. We are refusing to accept our place, and this is a classic definition of sin. I agree with the overall direction of Creation spirituality, emphasizing mystical imagination, but without including repentance, or life-changing *metanoia*, I fear that it will remain a utopian vision, or an eschatological vision, if you prefer.<sup>4</sup>

I am, however, appreciative to Creation spirituality because it has provoked me to reflect on what the human-nature relationship could be. The more I have reflected on Francis' writings and spirituality, the more I am convinced that his model for all the relationships in which humans participate is the human family. Two of his texts which provide the clearest indication of this are *The Canticle of the Creatures* and the *First*

*Letter to the Faithful*. In the latter, Francis writes to his lay followers of how our decision to do penance places us in relationship with Jesus. When we do penance we become the spouse, brother or sister, mother, and parent of Jesus. The strongest theme to emerge from the first part of the First Letter to the Faithful is that we become related to Jesus when we become penitents. Francis assumes this same underlying grid of familial relationship when he writes the capstone of his theological vision, *The Canticle of the Creatures*. He wrote this poem at the end of his life, and it captures his mystical relationship with God through the created world. This poem expresses through powerful symbolic language how the elements of nature are praiseworthy and related to both God and humanity. Francis praised the diversity and beauty of the plant kingdom ("Praised by You, my Lord, by our Sister Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us, and who produces varied fruits with colored flowers and herbs"). He admitted that we humans are subject to sin and in need of forgiveness, but he affirmed an even more fundamental truth that we are all related. The work seems to capture the sense of peace and reconciliation he achieved with the various elements of himself at the end of his life. I believe that Francis was named the patron saint of ecology because he loved nature but also because he articulated a mystical vision of the interrelatedness of all Creation in his life and in this poem.

Francis' vision of the goodness of the world is most evident in this poem, and with its lyrics it presents a vision in clear contrast to the pessimism of the heretical Cathars of his time. Raoul Manselli, an Italian social historian, has written a biography of St. Francis that is most helpful because it helps us understand him in the context of the popular religious currents of his era. He wrote:

Francis' repeated affirmation of deep devotion to the Eucharist and to the permanent presence of Christ on earth that it signified was directed in turn against the Cathars. Similarly, the *Canticle's* praise of God as Creator and for what he created strikes at the heart of one of the basic tenets of Catharism, according to which the Creator, or at least the ruler, of the physical world is Satan, as portrayed in the heresy's many and varying myths.

Against these ideas Francis did not resort to theological argumentation that would have been foreign to his temperament and, frankly, to his level of education. Rather, he brings out two aspects

of the world: the omnipotence of God and the positive quality of creation as a work of beauty, implying as well its goodness... The universe, therefore, cannot be evil: this is the conclusion contained in Francis' *Canticle*. Nor is it hell within which angels are imprisoned. Rather, it is the work and the result of an extraordinary, almighty goodness that, in the creation of the universe, reveals itself to be beauty as well.<sup>5</sup>

In *The Canticle of the Creatures*, therefore, we apprehend Francis' view of nature as a sacramental expression of God's generous love, a love which binds us to interdependent relationship. As in Francis' era, we live in a time that devalues nature's inherent goodness. The Cathars rejected this notion on religious grounds, while today our society strips, beats and pollutes nature for economic profit. Both stances are fundamental rejections of the incarnation.

#### BEYOND THE STEWARDSHIP MODEL: NATURE AS FAMILY

In the past thirty years, Christian theologians have tentatively begun to address the abuse of nature, generally by asserting that the Genesis story has been misunderstood and appropriated to justify profit at the expense of ecological wholeness. Christians and Jews have pointed to the early chapters in Genesis as a model for environmental stewardship. I certainly agree that stewardship is a good idea, and as a species we definitely need to embrace this as a model for caring for Creation. But the Franciscan theological tradition presents an additional model. I believe Francis left us a *familial* model of relating to Creation. In the stewardship model, humans care for the earth because we want to take care of ourselves and future generations; God "put us in charge" of the beauty and bounty of Earth. We are to care "on behalf of." The familial model values relationship with the beauty and diversity of Creation, celebrating the interaction between ourselves and Earth's many creatures. We are called to care for, as a member of God's family of creatures. We exist by God's grace, together, side by side. We can marvel at the miracle of life's diversity, and humbly acknowledge our simple membership, and at the same time recognize that there are certain responsibilities that we have as a species. I believe both of these spiritual traditions, stewardship as majority tradition and familial as minority, have co-existed from the beginnings of human religious practice.

Obviously we cannot live without objectifying parts of nature and using them for our food and well-being, but at the same time, I believe we are called to reflect on God's generosity to us expressed in the diverse colors, shapes, power, smells, textures, intricacy and magnificence of Creation. Agriculture necessarily operates out of the stewardship model, but I believe that we all need to practice some appreciation of nature for its own sake, whether it be bird-watching, flower planting, or camping. Creation has intrinsic value, and we do well to remind ourselves of this through regular activities. This was Francis' joy, and I became a Franciscan in part because that was my passion too, and his spirituality helped validate my own experience. I consider nature observation a spiritual discipline.

Francis is perhaps most original when he extends his notion of chivalric courtesy to non-human creatures. He was, of course, deeply influenced by the ideals of the troubadour and courtly love. He "spiritualized" the notion of *cortesía*, an Italian word far stronger than the English word "courtesy." It implies the notion of honorable deference, respect, largesse, special and personal consideration of the needs of others, especially the poor and vulnerable. Francis embodied a joyous humility in his respect for the good of Creation.<sup>6</sup>

I return to what I believe to be three essential themes of the Franciscan world view: a profound concern for relationship, a life of penance, and concern for the marginalized. Throughout history elements of this world view have been re-interpreted by followers of Francis to address the social, ecclesial and political challenges of their day, and I propose we simply do the same in our ecological age.

Based on Francis' approach to nature, I believe there are three attitudes most appropriate to followers of Francis today: the celebration of relationship, the promotion of courtesy and the practice of penance. What form might these attitudes, so fully embodied by Francis in the Middle Ages, take among us today? Celebrating our relationship with Brother Wind, Sister Water, Brother Fire, and our Sister Mother Earth must serve as the foundation for all of this, but for many, this must be preceded by acknowledging the existence of interdependent relationship. We in the industrialized West have forgotten how dependent our bodies are on safe and pure air, water, and food; these are fundamental to life, yet we take them for granted. Franciscans can provide a tremendous service to the Church and world by reminding our brothers and sisters to be grateful for the gifts of each day, and Francis left us an example of

celebrating the simple elements of life which most take for granted. Like Creation spirituality, a Franciscan Incarnational spirituality will begin by changing our internal focus, or consciousness. Personal, familial and communal celebrations can help this immensely.

The courtesy of Francis charms us even today. Generosity, respect and honor, all pillars of courtesy, are much-needed virtues throughout our world today, especially in areas of conflict over environmental issues. If one can sort through heated arguments, at stake are the well-being of plants, animals, and humans. All forms of life have an inherent right to exist, and elementary courtesy requires that we acknowledge this. Proclaiming peace and reconciliation was an expression of Francis' courtesy. We can imitate him by being environmental peacemakers. Just as Francis built peace in the relationship between the bishop and mayor by singing *The Canticle of the Creatures*, we can bring reconciliation to the conflicts around us by practicing and promoting respect for the existence and well-being of others. By honoring both parties in a conflictual situation we invite others to adopt a stance of respect and to acknowledge the right of others to exist. Direct confrontation of personal and corporate greed can be ineffectual. I believe that by encouraging others to acknowledge, respect and enjoy the relationships they have with others, that greed can be replaced with courtesy, and this seems fully consistent with Francis' approach.

### ECO-PENANCE

In the face of the global scale of environmental problems, I have often felt paralysis and despair. So many people making so many choices that cumulatively damage the earth's oceans, forests, food supply and atmosphere. Is there any reason to hope for a change of heart? I take great solace in being able to turn to the example of Francis. In the face of conflict, war, vice and violence, he practiced penance. More than simply manufactured feelings of regret, the Franciscan practice of penance is embodied humility. It consists of acknowledging our brokenness and sinfulness, our dependence on God's grace, and our need for conversion to the Gospel of Jesus. I firmly believe that in our age we can adopt Francis' stance of penance and humility in our relationship with the environment. We need to acknowledge that our environmental problems are not caused by any other species than ourselves. We need to admit that we are in need of God's grace to reform our behavior so that we

might live in peace with Creation, which is God's plan. We need to practice greater humility as a species. We need to practice eco-penance.

Eco-penance is both an interior attitude and a praxis. It promotes consistency between the statement of values we make about Creation and our behavior toward it. The practice of eco-penance includes a sense of personal responsibility for the environmental impacts of our lifestyle, and that of our society, and will lead to efforts to reduce the harmful effects that we have on other forms of life and our planetary habitat that we all depend upon. We can call upon the Church and world to join us in adopting this stance and then taking action appropriate to our local area.

Eco-penance promotes a sense of connection with the earth and relationship with other creatures, but it can take various forms: political advocacy, local actions, and communal prayer. In many cases the most important action we can take on behalf of other forms of life takes place in the political realm, whether writing letters of advocacy on behalf of endangered species or speaking at public meetings to urge the clean up of abandoned toxic sites near families. Yet politics can be confusing and frustrating for all of us, so many times the best way to create and maintain a passion for Creation is through a local project which shows specific, observable results. Beach and creek clean-ups can generate great enthusiasm because people can see the fruits of their labors. This kind of activity is even more powerful if it is accompanied by reflection and social analysis. Transformation of individuals and structures is most possible when action is joined to reflection. How powerful it would be if a parish community had a period of theological reflection the week before a clean-up day and hosted a large celebration afterward! A community garden can provoke a neighborhood to a greater connection to their locale and foster a greater awareness of the need for clean air, soil and water.

Those inspired today by Francis could foster more of these good actions by participating in them but also by bringing concern for the earth into our prayer. We have the ability to influence our local faith communities by including concern for creation in our prayer and work. There is no reason that concern for other forms of life and our planet's health could not be made a major part of a parish penance services during Advent or Lent. If we did nothing else, simply practicing simplicity and spending more time with friends, family and nature would do wonders for those around us, and encourage those who work in the environmental movement as well.

#### A DISTINCTIVE FRANCISCAN CONTRIBUTION

One of the greatest strengths in the Franciscan tradition has been the diversity of responses to God's generous love. There are many ways in which Franciscans can begin to take action to address the threats to our Sister Mother Earth, and I would encourage everyone to engage themselves in more than one. Nonetheless, I would like to highlight two broad issues in particular. I hope that the efforts of many Franciscans can touch on either of these concerns.

Environmental justice is an issue that ties together two dimensions of our Franciscan world view—concern for Creation and option for the poor and marginalized—by stressing equal protections for those typically ignored in the pursuit of the environmental agenda, people of color and the poor. Environmental justice directly links environment concerns with social justice issues by addressing the disproportionate impact of pollution on people of color and the poor. Low-income neighborhoods suffer more than those with greater income because they cannot marshal the resources to defend themselves from those who have more political and social power. The appalling contrast between the obese bodies in the industrialized North and the distended bellies of starving children in the South is a powerful picture. On an international scale, addressing debt relief for “Third World” countries must be the highest priority for environmental justice. Environmental racism can take many forms. Recent immigrants from Mexico working in agriculture may suffer from the harmful effects of pesticides. Powerful agribusiness corporations have resisted efforts to restrict the use of these chemicals, but when there is an incident in the fields, media don't report it because it doesn't concern “their audience.” There are some who do not yet feel comfortable embracing concern for Creation, or who do not yet see any connection between their religious faith and environmental concern. Environmental justice is a perfect “starter issue,” because the anyone with an awareness of God's justice can see the harmful effects of environmental injustice in the U.S. Concern for environmental justice is of course more than a “starter issue.” We can express our solidarity with suffering human and nonhuman communities by taking action to defend their well-being. Hopefully this issue can help all of us see that God's concern for the well-being of Creation extends to more than human beings.

Biological diversity is the variety of different plant, animal and

insect species on our planet. Diversity is important ecologically because many forms of life depend on each other, and when human activities injure one species, its loss may impact many other forms of life. Our ecosystems need all their “pieces,” all their species; human disruption is now ripping off large parts of the fabric of life, and the whole cloth is at risk of unraveling. Biological diversity is not simply an abstract concept removed from our everyday existence. Many medicines are based on new chemical compounds discovered in rare species in the tropics. People in the United States used to consume a far more diverse diet than they do today; industrial agriculture finds it far easier to manage a small number of crops. Biological diversity is needed even more today because of human-caused disruption to our planet’s climate; diversity between species and within species provides more flexibility for responding to environmental change. Endangered species are truly the most vulnerable and threatened forms of life today.

Diversity is an important principle in Christian spirituality as well. Psalm 148 and the canticle of the three young men in the fiery furnace (Daniel 3:56–88) are the Scripture passages which are the clearest influences on Francis’ *The Canticle of the Creatures*, and both speak of the value of diversity; fishes, sea monsters, different kinds of trees, beasts, creeping things, flying birds, all things growing from the earth. God loves all kinds of diversity and individuality; otherwise, God wouldn’t have made it so! Christianity has celebrated the goodness of this diversity, but we Christians have never had to confront the threats to its diversity that we do today. Because Scripture and Francis speak so eloquently of diversity, indeed because they treasure it, I believe that we are called to be its advocates today.

Few other Christians have the rich theological tradition of relationship with nonhuman creation and of valuing diversity and individuality. Followers of St. Francis are uniquely positioned because of this tradition to address issues of species diversity. Because we value these, I heartily urge all Franciscans, lay or religious, to consider how we can become better advocates for other forms of life. I honestly believe that if we don’t speak up for nonhuman Creation, few others in Christianity will.

Followers of Francis are called in a special way to call all people to a healthy relationship with Creation. As followers of the patron saint of ecology we have a special responsibility to model a loving, familial relationship with all Creation, especially those members, human and nonhuman, who are threatened by actions of violence, greed and callousness.

We are called to be advocates for those who cannot speak of the suffering caused by human ignorance and indifference. We are heirs to a rich theological tradition that can provide a framework for incorporating environmental sensitivity into religious practice and activity. I pray that those more skilled than I can articulate a contemporary theology of nature in the Franciscan tradition that can spur us on to more radical prayer and action in relationship with nature. We have the tremendous resource of being leaders in the Church, and we are capable of embodying Francis’ passionate love of Creation and preaching about it through our word and example.



## Notes

1. Kenan Osborne OFM, *Incarnation, Individuality and Diversity*, The Cord (1995) 45:3, 23.
2. Zachary Hayes OFM, *Christ, Word of God and Exemplar of Humanity*, The Cord (1996) 46:1, 13–14.
3. *Ibid.*, 16.
4. For further critique of Creation spirituality, see Sallie McFague, *Body of God*, Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1993, 69–73.
5. Raoul Manselli, *St. Francis of Assisi*, trans. Paul Duggan, Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1988, 316–317.
6. For a discussion of Francis’ courtesy toward nature as innovation, see Roger Sorrell, *St. Francis of Assisi and Nature*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1988, 69–75. This work is the best treatment of Francis’ attitudes toward nature.