

CONVERSATIONS . . .

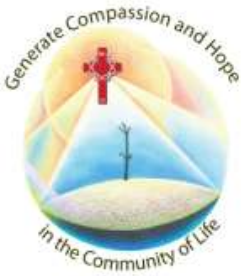
DECEMBER 2009

VOL. I, NO. 4

...with Johannes B. Freyer, ofm



“If we, like Francis, recognize in all creatures our sisters and brothers then this means that we love them and take care of them. . . . then they become a precious part of our lives; they become gifts and offerings which then make our own life possible...”



“All praise be yours, my Lord, through our Sister Mother Earth, who sustains us and governs us, and produces various fruits with colored flowers and herbs. . . .”

[St. Francis of Assisi, Canticle of the Sun]

Peace and all good to you during this Advent Season!

Franciscan Sisters of the Poor
2008 General Chapter Direction Statement

We continue our series of conversations and interviews, which explore the deeper meaning of our General

Chapter direction: **“Generate compassion and hope in the community of life.”**

This conversation is with Friar Johannes B. Freyer, ofm, who discusses the theology of St. Francis of Assisi and the relevance of religion in the **context of today’s global ecological problems.** Fr. Freyer is the Rector of the Pontifical Antonianum University in Rome and has written and lectured extensively on the relevance of St. Francis and the Franciscan charism today. Fr. Freyer has a rich education and background in theology, philosophy, spirituality, justice and peace.



We hope that you visit our website frequently and we invite you to join us in our mission to generate compassion and hope in the community of life.

Johannes B. Freyer, ofm

Sister Tiziana Merletti, sfp
Congregational Minister
and Council

Fr. Freyer, How relevant is religion in the context of the worldwide ecological problem that we are experiencing?

Many climate researchers are sounding the alarm. The changes in the world climate are accelerating in a dramatic fashion and much faster than previously assumed. This catastrophic development has been brought about to a large extent by humanity itself and may only be quickly slowed down by prompt action.

Worldwide the ecological problems such as the extinction of species, environmental pollution and climate change are connected to social problems,



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spreading poverty, hunger, diseases, immigration, exploitation of women and children and much more. Technical solutions to this are not sufficient, as important as they might be, in order to change anything. What is needed is a swift and decisive change of our human mentality, thinking and behavior. **The point is to create a cleaner, socially more responsive and healthy world. Such a comprehensive change in human mentality and behavior also includes in particular the religious and moral ideas of humankind.**

Can St. Francis and the Franciscan spirituality and theology be an inspiration and help when tackling ecological challenges today?

This brings religion into play as an important authority creating a way of thinking. The



ethical and moral principles of religions also influence human action towards nature. Consciously or unconsciously, our behavior *vis-à-vis* our environment and nature is also based on our religious worldview. Our worldview,

which influences our behavior towards creation, is also shaped by our religious views. Moreover, religion, because of its moral authority, has the power to determine the image the believer has of the cosmos and to change how she interacts with nature. Religion not only consists in a belief in a transcendental god or gods and in a life after death. Religion also informs human behavior *vis-à-vis* the real world, material nature and the entire creation.

For Francis, creation is a symbol of the greatness and holiness of God and, therefore, it is good in all its dimensions because it **was created by God, “the highest good.”**

A figure known and beloved in many religions is St. Francis of Assisi -- who for many is also the saint of ecology. Francis and the great representatives of Franciscan spirituality and theology all lived 800 years ago. The enormous ecological problems of today were alien to them. Then, human beings were still more at nature's mercy. Today nature is at humanity's mercy. However, even in consideration of these different times, the Franciscan tradition can inspire us today of how to deal with creation in a responsible way.

Which inspirations and ideas can we get directly from Francis?



In his writings, in two important texts, Francis himself speaks about creation and creatures. These are the 23rd Chapter of the Rule that was not confirmed by papal bull, and the famous Canticle of the Sun. What is immediately noticeable is

that when Francis himself speaks of creation and creatures, he does this in prayer and in the language of poetry and of thanksgiving. Francis experiences himself in creation as having received a gift and expresses his gratitude for this gift. **By intensely living together with all creatures, he discovers in and through them the love and benevolence of the Creator.**

“Thus, we can learn from Francis that nature is not just intended for our use and benefit, but that it has its own intrinsic value in its beauty, diversity and very existence.”



For Francis, creation is a symbol of the greatness and holiness of God and, therefore, it is good in all its dimensions because it was **created by God, “the highest good.”** The creatures have a quasi-sacramental character **since they symbolize God’s** presence in the world. It is because of this sacramental character that Francis accords all things their own dignity. **Creation is the space that God gave to humanity for it to live in.** Thus, the life story of humans is closely connected with creation.

What can we learn from this attitude of St. Francis?

For Francis creation and history are closely connected, since **life and human history are not conceivable without creation.** Humanity and creation are connected with each



other and dependent on each other in a symbiotic relationship. It is in this mutual bond that Francis recognizes a universal brotherhood and sisterhood. All creatures become sisters and brothers since all, together with humanity, received life, their existence, from

the same God the Creator. On the basis of this brotherhood and sisterhood it is impossible for Francis to appropriate creation to exploit it or to subjugate it. To the contrary, Francis feels called to serve all creatures, even wild animals. Being richly endowed in and by creation, Francis does not wish to squander the gifts received, but restore them to God in gratitude and responsibility, by himself becoming the brother and servant of all creatures.

“This insight of love may then lead us, just like Francis, to gratitude and praise of God.”

Francis puts nature as creation in a greater context. He not only sees its practical value and usefulness for us human beings. For Francis, nature is not just simply the material

resource making it possible for a few human beings to live a life of luxury and wealth. It is this way of dealing with nature that plunges large parts of humanity into poverty and misery. Furthermore, by exploiting nature, future generations are robbed of their necessary livelihood. Francis does not evoke this attitude of use and usefulness, which ultimately destroys nature and becomes the cause of great need. **Francis discovers the connection between nature as creation and the belief in God, the Creator.** Therefore, creation is for him part of his belief, which he celebrates in liturgy, poetry, song and dance. Thus, nature is a living part of his relationship to God. Therefore, he also feels responsible for his co-creatures.

Francis cares for and fosters nature. During a cold winter he feeds animals; if a tree is felled he wants a live part of the stem to remain so that new shoots may sprout; he ransoms animals that are unnecessarily led to slaughter. Thus, we can learn from Francis that nature is not just intended for our use and benefit, but that it has its own intrinsic value in its beauty, diversity and very existence. We have a special responsibility for all creatures because they are part of our life -- because they play a great role in our relationship with God and since without them we cannot live. This means that we recognize and respect the intrinsic value and dignity of all creatures and protect and conserve the variety and richness of nature for its own sake and that we have to deal responsibly with resources to safeguard the future of our planet. All of this also means that we denounce the various forms of abuse, pollution and destruction of nature and help to prevent them. In real terms this also means that we have to change our lifestyle in order not to squander and waste the resources of creation, but help to save them so that all may benefit from them.

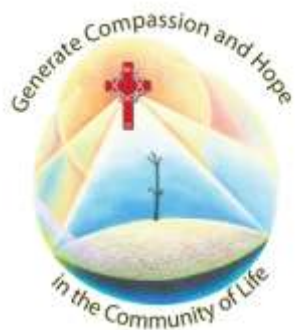
If we, like Francis, recognize in all creatures our sisters and brothers then this means that we love them and take care of them. If we, like Francis, place these creatures in the context of love, then they are not only objects of our consumption and pleasure -- then they become a precious part of our lives; they become gifts and offerings which then make our own life possible. We cannot live without the other creatures. This insight of love may then lead us, just like Francis, to gratitude and praise of God.

Here are some questions to ponder:

What is it like for you to contemplate the holiness and goodness of God's creation? Why not spend a few moments thanking and praising God . . .

According to Fr. Freyer, “St. Francis accords all things their own dignity.”

Is creation sacramental for you? If so, how?



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