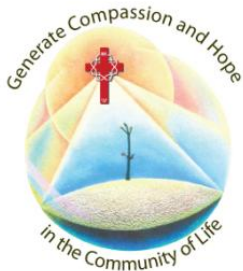


...with Keith Douglass Warner OFM

LIVING THE GOSPEL ON A CLIMATE DISRUPTED PLANET

“The responsibility to foster ecological literacy flows from the witness of St. Francis’ sensory love of creation and his journey into the Incarnation. Faith, spirituality, theology, and ethics are necessary, but it will require incorporating forms of scientific literacy as well. Ecological literacy should be an important goal for Franciscans in the 21st century.” - [Keith Warner, OFM]





Franciscan Sisters of the Poor
2008 General Chapter Direction Statement

Chapter direction: "Generate compassion and hope in the community of life." This article by Brother Keith Warner, OFM, **Living the Gospel on a Climate Disrupted Planet**, focuses on climate justice and the need for a Franciscan response that is both challenging and prophetic.

Brother Keith is a Franciscan Friar of the St. Barbara Province in California. He is a lecturer in the Department of Religious Studies, and Assistant Director of Education for the Center for Science, Technology and Society, at Santa Clara University. His research investigates the emergence of environmental and sustainability ethics within scientific and religious institutions. He has authored or coauthored 3 books, including **Care for Creation: A Franciscan Spirituality of the Earth**, and more than 18 articles in environmental science, spirituality and ethics journals. Are we ready to move away from our denial and disbelief -- individually and communally -- and journey toward healing the community of life? How do we grapple with these realities and live out an ethic of justice? This issue of Conversations engages these questions and offers a direction for us to live and act with joy and compassions in these times.

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!

Sister Tiziana Merletti, sfp
Congregational Minister
and Council

*Not to hurt our humble brethren (the animals)
Is our first duty to them, but to stop there is not enough.
We have a higher mission:
To be of service to them whenever they require it
[Not to Hurt . . . St. Francis of Assisi]*

Peace and all good to you!

We continue our series of conversations, exploring the deeper meaning of our General



Keith Douglass Warner OFM

CLIMATE JUSTICE

The disruption of the Earth's climate shows every indication of being the most serious problem facing the human family in the 21st century. The scope of negative impacts that climate disruption will bring is far greater than most of us care to imagine.



The terms “global warming” and “climate change” do not adequately convey what is already happening and what is almost certainly going to happen during our lifetimes. At issue is not so much a warmer

environment, but the disruption of a predictable climate upon which human civilization depends. Average temperatures are already rising, but the disruption of rainfall, drinking water supply, and agriculture are much more inconvenient than a warm spell . . .

- Deserts are becoming even dryer.
- Rainy seasons are delayed or curtailed.
- Storms are growing more intense and destructive.
- Agriculture of all kinds appears ominously threatened, which will certainly most



impact the poor.

- The habitat, or home range, of our fellow creatures on Earth is changing far more rapidly than plants and animals can adapt in their behaviors. This puts further pressure on species already threatened with extinction.
- Global climate disruption threatens to unravel years of sustainable development work and to accelerate the erosion of Earth's biodiversity.

Climate disruption is a social justice issue

because those who have benefitted from burning fossil fuels (the advanced economies of Europe and North America) are in regions that have yet to witness the most serious impacts of climate disruption. The poorest countries tend to be clustered around the equator, and these are already experiencing noticeably altered climate patterns. Some small island nations are making plans to abandon their ancestral lands as they are swallowed up by the ocean's rise.

Indigenous peoples in the arctic regions are among the most seriously affected. The permafrost is melting under their feet. Vast boreal forests are dying off. Without the protection of coastal ice, powerful ocean storms are dramatically reshaping fishing villages and their livelihoods. Trends in the tropical and arctic regions confirm fears that we will see millions of climate refugees added to the stream of international



migrants seeking a new home. Our friends at [Catholic Relief Services](#) report that decades of painstaking economic development in the world's poorest countries are being reversed by the disruption of historic climate patterns and tropical storms of unprecedented impact (recall the Pakistan floods of August 2010).

CALLING FOR A FRANCISCAN RESPONSE

These grim realities challenge our understanding of faith and invite us to an adult spirituality. To generate compassion for the community of life requires us to address this most pressing crisis. Yet we humans pause. It is painful to confront this reality. We fear. We feel discouraged, even we religious. Can we make a difference? Is there any

hope? Last year, the International Union of Superiors General called for renewing



religious life in a spirit of mysticism and prophecy. **Our Father Francis and our Mother Clare provide wonderful examples of how to link these two features of religious life. It is precisely this most precious need that they can help us with: hope. Our planet is already disrupted. We need compassion and courage.**

We need a contemplative spirit that can feed our spirits, but also a practical wisdom that, when combined with scientific literacy,

can guide us through the clouds of supposed uncertainties. I believe that our Franciscan tradition has essential tools for fashioning a Catholic response to these crises. Our Father Francis is patron saint of the poor, but also the patron saint of ecological literacy. This, plus our contemplative tradition, must be our guides as we journey more deeply into a climate-disrupted world.

I was moved to pursue Franciscan religious life by my experience of nature, contemplative prayer, and solidarity with the poor. When I applied to the Friars twenty years ago, I asked about environmental ministries, but received mostly quizzical looks. I was surprised – indeed scandalized -- to discover how few resources were devoted to this. My vocation director and others expressed support for the idea of

Franciscan environmental education, but could offer no promise that I could undertake



this kind of ministry. Thus began my twenty year efforts to understand why Franciscans were not deeply invested in ministries that care for the Earth.

There is widespread popular expectation that Franciscans model care for creation. This dates to 1979 when Pope John Paul II declared St. Francis to be *oecologiae cultorum patronum caelestem*. This expression could be translated as “the heavenly patron of those who promote

(animate, nurture) ecology.” Latin has no word for “environmentalist,” so the Pope used the term “ecology.” Perhaps the most helpful translation for this declaration would be: **Francis, the Patron Saint of Ecological Literacy.**

FRANCISCAN ECOLOGICAL LITERACY

David Orr, the preeminent American philosopher of environmental education, coined the term “ecological literacy” to mean the ability to understand and live within the natural systems that make life on earth possible. He critiques conventional education for perpetuating environmental problems by presenting knowledge apart from a moral framework. He proposes restructuring pedagogies to incorporate knowledge of human

dependence upon the earth's ecosystems, and revising its goals to include explicit ethical reflection on our human choices. His educational vision is remarkably coherent with the contemporary Franciscan worldview, and we can learn from it, in our personal and ministerial lives.



The responsibility to foster ecological literacy flows from the witness of St. Francis' sensory love of creation and his journey into the Incarnation. Faith, spirituality, theology, and ethics are

necessary, but it will require incorporating forms of scientific literacy as well.

Ecological literacy should be an important goal for Franciscans in the 21st century.

Without accurate information about the really real, grounded in the material reality of our Earth, Franciscan care for creation can devolve quickly into sentimentalism. As a Franciscan family, we must face the fact that many of our members have fallen into the trap of sentimentalism.

Much Francis-inspired concern for creation has been exclusively affective, uninformed by patterns of pervasive ecological breakdown driven by human behavior. It is as



though Francis' example inspires people to focus only on the subjective self, one's pets, and garden statues. I have been credited with coining the concept of "Birdbath Franciscanism." To remedy this idiosyncratic and disengaged approach, and to foster authentic ecological consciousness, **I recommend we marshal our resources to foster Franciscan ecological literacy. This approach will require us to take seriously scientific literacy.**

RETRIEVING FRANCISCAN SCIENCE

Francis is an inspiration, but his inspiration alone is insufficient to guide us in contemporary environmental issues. About ten years ago, leading Franciscan scholars began the [retrieval of the Franciscan intellectual tradition](#). This built upon prior efforts to draw from the example of Francis and Clare by including [the philosophy and theology of Bonaventure and Scotus](#). This has expanded our thinking from the individual charismatic witness of Francis to a broader intellectual framework reflecting his intuition.



More recently, I have conducted research into the scientific dimension of our tradition. You might reasonably ask: what Franciscan tradition of scientific inquiry? The examples I have investigated are from our historical past: the 13th through 16th Century, but they express in their own way, through scientific work, the love Francis had for creation. These figures are not well known because they were not beatified or canonized. They

were influential figures in their time, but are virtually unknown to the American Franciscan family today.

[Bernardino de Sahagún](#) can be considered the first anthropologist researcher into the life and culture of Mexico 1529-1590. [Bartholomew the Englishman](#) (c. 1200–1272)

created an encyclopedia to prepare Friars to travel through their natural and social world preaching the Gospel. [Roger Bacon](#) (c. 1214–1294) was an English Friar who pioneered many philosophical ideas on which the scientific method was created. These three men practiced medieval science using the concepts, tools and institutions of their era to gather, organize, analyze and interpret data about society and nature. Their investigations reflect a Franciscan concern for nature, rooted in the assertion that all creation is religiously and morally significant. You can find a more detailed article I wrote about these three figures for the [Journal of the Association of Franciscan Colleges and Universities](#).

At least three Franciscan values appear consistently in the vocations and work of these friars:

First - they understood, like Francis, that creation is good, and can lead one to God.

Since creation reflects God in some way, studying nature -- using the best available intellectual tools – is in some way learning about God, God’s character, and about God’s activity in the world.

Second - they conducted their scientific work in community. They participated in, or were leaders in, their religious communities and in scholarly communities. For these Franciscans, the process of scientific inquiry was social, and took place in relationship with others.

Third - their scientific research had a moral purpose: for evangelization, and the benefit of Church and society. Scientific inquiry was inherently good, for it helped

them to better understand our Creator and creation.

How was the Franciscan tradition of science lost? This is an important question, but a difficult one to answer. Scientific work has always been but one small part of the Franciscan intellectual tradition, and these three figures were in some ways exceptional. These examples of Franciscan scientists were actively engaged with, and advanced, the paradigms and methodologies of their eras. The Franciscan tradition of science did not successfully make the transition to the modern scientific paradigm, for several complex reasons beyond the scope of this essay. Perhaps a more important question for us to ask today is: **how can we revive this tradition and apply it in service to our Earth?**

FOOD FOR OUR JOURNEY THROUGH A TROUBLED WORLD

I suggest that as we consider the future of religious life, we consider the intersection of our own love of God's creation and the world's greatest needs. The challenges are grim, consequential, and religious. Birdbath Franciscanism and its sentimentality are of little help here. Rather, **we need to marshal knowledge, courage, and compassion and focus them over a sustained period of time on a common effort.** We need genuine examples of self-sacrifice, such as, Francis, Dorothy Day, and Gandhi. We need the contemplative practice of women like Clare to sustain us through a difficult journey. **But we also need the ability to engage in a meaningful way with the scientific and ethical dimensions of climate disruption.**

The human family is beginning to grapple with what it means to live in a climate disrupted world. Denial and disbelief are still the most common response, and



understandably so. It is quite painful to confront the consequences of our human actions, and the actions of our immediate forebears.

To ignore our fossil fuel addiction – and its harm to people and planet – does “feel” easier than confronting the discomfoting knowledge, to say nothing of challenging the

problematic human behaviors. There are in fact a great deal more fossil fuel resources



under the surface of our planet. The billions of people living on a few dollars a day would have better lives if it were available to them, but to continue the model of fossil fuel energy of the 20th century would result in great tragedy.

Any meaningful reduction in climate disrupting gasses will have to be based on international cooperation. This will require countries to practice more self-restraint than any prior international environmental treaty. It would be my hope that we Franciscans can support advocacy for this at the United Nations through [Franciscans International](#).

Redesigning human use of energy requires that we confront ethical dilemmas, or problems that defy simple solutions because legitimate interests are pitted against each other. **The problem of climate disruption cannot and should not be solved on the backs of the poor.** Addressing the ethical dimension of climate disruption must necessarily address the reality of a wide and accelerating gap between the wealthy and the poor. Those already suffering from de-humanizing poverty -- and those most likely

to suffer from a disrupted climate -- are least likely to have benefitted from prior burning of fossil fuels that have emitted the carbon in our atmosphere.



Global climate disruption threatens all the hard-fought gains in sustainable development around the world. Addressing climate disruption is inescapably linked

to the uneven and inequitable global economic development. Any international solution will necessarily have to address the ethical implications of that as well. Thus, **to address the needs of our climate disrupted planet require both ecological literacy and an ethic of justice – to those presently poor, but also future generations.**

This may all feel quite overwhelming, and rightfully so. Few of us can readily make a difference. Nonetheless, our faith helps us to recognize that God still loves the human family, even as we have disrupted the delicate balance of the Earth's climate. **The first step is to commit oneself or one's community to engage this issue with wisdom, prudence, prayer, and an open heart.** [The St. Francis Pledge](#) [click here to take the pledge] is a promise and a commitment by Catholic individuals, families, communities, organizations and institutions to protect God's Creation and to advocate on behalf of people in poverty who face the harshest impacts of global climate change.

The five elements of the St. Francis Pledge are to:

1. Pray and reflect on the duty to care for God's Creation and protect the poor and vulnerable.
2. Learn about and educate others on the causes and moral dimensions of climate change.
3. Assess how we--as individuals and in our families, parishes and other affiliations--contribute to climate change by our own energy use, consumption, waste, etc.
4. Act to change our choices and behaviors to reduce the ways we contribute to climate change.
5. Advocate for Catholic principles and priorities in climate change discussions and decisions, especially as they impact those who are poor and vulnerable.

I encourage all Franciscans to take and live this pledge to help them live the Gospel on our climate disrupted planet. We are called to live with joy even as we face these difficult realities, as my confrere [Jacek Orzechowski](#) and friends demonstrate with this Polar Bear Plunge. St. Francis, pray for us!

[For more information about the St. Francis Pledge and the Catholic Climate Covenant , please go to this website: <http://catholicclimatecovenant.org/the-st-francis-pledge/>]

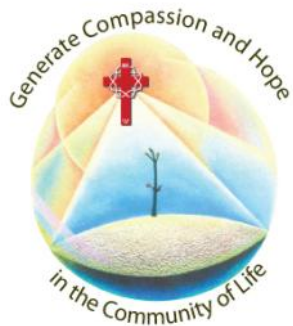


How does our Franciscan contemplative tradition guide us in responding to our climate disrupted world?

**Is Climate Justice a social justice issue for your community (local, religious, global)?
Why?**

Do you advocate for Climate Justice – especially for the poor? How?

How do you consider it to be your responsibility “to foster ecological literacy?”



. . . CONVERSATIONS