

A Spirit Earthly Enough: Toward a Philosophy for the Emerging Franciscan Earth Corps to Engage Youth in Climate Change Adaptation

Brother Coyote (Gary Paul Nabhan, OEF, PhD.)

It sometimes seems odd to me that we as Christians embrace the notion that Jesus came down from heaven to do healing on earth, but that we as contemporary Christians do not take seriously the need for healing *of* the earth as one of the highest expressions of our faith. If God so loved this Earth that he/she gave us his/her only son to live here among us, then how in this world can we ignore that this Earth itself is blessed, that the very soil which was touched by the feet of Jesus is sacred?

And yet, many of those who have wished to walk in the path of Jesus do so by defining their vocation as service to the poor, sick and downtrodden of humanity, as if Adam (humankind) was not of the earth, as reflected in the core meaning of *adama*. Ultimately, working for social justice and human healing and working for environmental justice and ecological restoration are one in the same; they restore us to right relationship with all of Creation, and through that process, to right relationship with the Creator. If we need such an impulse explicitly sanctioned by the many gospels or versions of the Good News, we need only remember the passage in the Gospel of Thomas in which Jesus encourages his followers to “go out to preach/to care for all of creation.”

And yet, we must daily confront the oddest of paradoxes: in the countries with the highest percentages of their populations calling themselves Christians

(in the sense of believing in Jesus and attending church), we must bear witness to the highest percentages of the lands and waters being broken from their original nature, that is fragmented, degraded, contaminated or sickened. It is hard to be healthy Christians if the land on which we live is sickened, or if the waters in which we swim or drink can sicken humans as well as other-than-human lives.

Of course, this degradation of Creation is not new; in fact its prevalence as well as its antiquity may be why we are often numbed by it, or oblivious to it. But few of us would ever claim aloud that such degradation is a tolerable and Christianly way to live here on this blessed Earth. In fact, diligent care for Creation may be one of the major disconnects between Christian belief and Christian practice over the last five hundred years. The loss of species and degradation of their (our) habitats may well be—in the words of Harvard biologist E. O. Wilson—“the thing for which future generations will be most likely to forgive us.”

Perhaps that is why, more than ever before in human (and Christian) history, we need to reflect on the special calling which a privileged youth named Francesco di Bernardone was given, a calling which transformed him into Saint Francis of Assisi, now known as the Patron Saint of Ecology.

At a time in his life when young Francesco was adrift, wandering about outside of the walls of the city-state of Assisi, and disenfranchised from both his own family and faith, he stumbled upon the ruins of San Damiano on the lower and more degraded slopes of Monte Subasio. There, he heard the Holy Spirit say,

“Francesco, restore my church (my dwelling place).”

The young man took up this calling, and restored the physical structure of the chapel of San Damiano, but more importantly, he built a truly Christian

community—the precursor of the Franciscan Order—*while initiating the physical, collective labor of restoration.*

But that is not all. I have always supposed that when Francesco and his friends had finally restored the walls and beams and roof to San Damiano, the Spirit called him once again.

“Francesco, good job, my son, but when I asked you to restore the church, I did not mean San Damiano in isolation. Francesco, restore *the Church.*”

And so, St. Francis began that task, a task which will never end. Before his time, the religious were cloistered away from society (and nature) at large; he let the religious speak in the vernacular to and live with the poor, the sick, the landless, and the salt of the earth. He even preached and sang his praise of the Creator to other creatures. He extended (if he did not explicitly initiate) the practice of conscientious objection to warring between city-states, nations, faiths and species. And above all, he took a vow of poverty—that of doing no harm by the accumulation of capital and the widening of his ecological footprint—so that he could walk in the path of Jesus “with no fixed abode in which to lay his head.”

Now, nearly a thousand years later, we must again let the Holy Spirit call us to a task even larger than the one which Francis was commissioned to do: to restore the ever-Emerging Church through restoring the Earth, that dwelling place which we have had the blessing to have shared and to share with Jesus himself. In the twenty-first century, restoring the church will ultimately be done by reopening its walls to embrace all of Creation, and spiritual healing will ultimately be done by halting the environmental degradation which differentially

affects the poor and disenfranchised populations, cultures and species struggling to remain on this planet.

For that reason, Saint Francis should truly be called the Patron Saint of Restoration Ecology, for he took rebuilding the church both literally and figuratively. We must do so as well, and we can do so over the few next decades by recruiting and mentoring a Franciscan Earth Corps at the *Fourth Order* in the Franciscan family, one which cares for the rest of Creation as much as it does our own species, for our species will be left further impoverished and sickened if we do not fully care for all of Creation.

The very act of being engaged in ecological restoration—particularly where it builds environmental justice for the poor and disenfranchised—is a physical, corporeal means of expressing our love for the Creator through our care for Creation. Particularly for youth, walking the talk is what it is all about, for they can smoke out our own hypocrisy, contradictions, and failure to practice what we preach as quickly as anyone can. To give youth the chance to be physically, socially, intellectually and spiritually engaged in ecological restoration in service to environmental justice means that they can have the opportunity to see their values and practice integrated.

But just where and how should we target the quest for and practice of Franciscan restoration for the twenty-first century? Obviously, adapting to climate change must be a driver, and healing lands after climatic disasters is a must. Over 3000 counties in the U.S. suffered from climate-related disasters in 2012, more than ever before in American history; in addition, six Mexican states suffered the worst drought in their history between 2010 and 2012. Here are a few guideposts that we should seek out along the way:

1. We should situate our restoration sites in landscapes and communities where it will build environmental justice, and reduce or even halt and reverse further damage to the health and access to live-able wages of the poor and marginalized in those places.
2. We should practice Franciscan restoration in the context of building multi-ethnic and interfaith understanding, so that youth of many backgrounds and faiths are welcomed to participate in the process as a tangible expression of their own spirituality put into practice.
3. We should seek out sites which benefit both migratory and resident species, and include youth from both immigrant and long-term resident families in this practice.
4. The youth should not simply be engaged in the physical labor of restoration, but be exposed through open-ended discussions about the root causes and social consequences of the climate change and environmental damage they are attempting to undo, and the potential benefits of long-term restoration to the human and other-than-human community.
5. They should be advised through tangible lessons that restoration efforts will not take root and heal unless the destructive processes which preceded them are abated.
6. They should be given ample opportunities to express their own emotional, intellectual and spiritual growth, doubts and misgivings as the collective work proceeds, so that their personal growth is validated and encouraged.
7. They should be reminded that the emerging church and the evolving universe are not in opposition to one another-- nor are science and religion--- when both are in service to Creation.

On my own last pilgrimage to Assisi, I had set out to do silent walking meditation from my lodging in the town center to the sacred site of San Damiano, when I was rudely awakened by a cacophony of jackhammers. In the wake of a terrible earthquake, the structure of San Damiano had been weakened, and the walls as well as the tile roof had suffered considerable damage. But funds rolled in from all parts of the world to repair the damage, and once again the ancient chapel was being restored, or at least, given a face lift.

And yet, knowledge of that did not initially ease my sense of sadness that I could only visit San Damiano if I accepted the noise and the chaos that went with its restoration! I circled around it, but did not enter, until the jackhammers were set down while the workers ate their lunches. I entered the chapel and went to the back pew to pray, trying to overcome a headache from all the noise, and a deep sense of disorientation, if not spiritual dryness.

As I kneeled and prayed, occasionally weeping in grief for my own dryness, my thoughts began to drift, even as I tried to center my prayer on the Christ crucified on the San Damiano cross. But then, something shifted. I gradually realized that I was being spoken to-- in Italian, no less-- and that I was being asked to pay attention to what was immediately before me. As I redirected my eyes to the San Damiano cross, and noticed that the feet of Jesus appeared to be moving ever so slightly. I wondered if another earthquake was beginning, or if the previous one and all the jackhammering had weakened the wall behind the cross. In any case, the toes of Jesus seemed to be wiggling, and once I realized what I was seeing, I began to laugh as if I was being tickled.

“Take little steps,” I heard the voice of Francesco say to me, in medieval Italian.

I strained to understand what he was saying. “Slow steps? No, no, are you saying for me to take *little*... little steps?”

“*Little* steps... they accumulate slowly, it seems, but they will get you there on time. *Little steps.*”

I began to laugh aloud, uproariously, until a German man who had come into the chapel to take photos and perhaps pray gave me a harsh look. But then, the jackhammers began once more, so that my laughter was drowned out by the larger chaos around us. I took leave from the chapel, and continued on my way, without speaking, but it didn't seem as if I was intruded upon by the noise of the reconstruction work anymore. In fact, I welcomed it. It reminded me of how every church, every faith, every place inhabited on earth needs renewal. We can all be part of such restoration if we patiently, diligently take little steps toward our larger goal.