A universal maxim proclaims: “There is no love more powerful than a mother’s love.” Standing amid the Umbrian hills near Assisi, St. Francis fittingly associated their lush verdancy with such a passionate and luxuriant affection. As Bonaventure tells us: “The realization that everything comes from the same source filled Francis with greater affection than ever and he called even the most insignificant creatures his brothers and sisters, because he knew they had the same origin as himself” (590).

Francis’s understandings about the earth and its Source came from Sacred Scripture, particularly the Psalms, the canticles of the daily liturgical Office, and the agrarian culture of Assisi. He knew the creation stories from Genesis by heart and the reality that “the Lord’s is the earth and its fullness; the world and those who dwell in it (Ps 24:1). From Genesis 2:15 he believed that God entrusted the cultivation of the earth to humans—not to exploit it, but “to till it and to keep it” (as God sustains all creation). Like the Israelites, he also understood, “The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; for you are strangers and guests with me” (Lev 25:23). He comprehended the connection of human life to the land proclaimed in Psalm 65:9-13:

You visit the earth and water it, you greatly enrich it; the river of God is full of water; you provide the people with grain, for so you have prepared it. You water its furrows abundantly, settling its ridges, softening it with showers, and blessing its growth. You crown the year with your bounty; your wagon tracks overflow with richness.

The pastures of the wilderness overflow, the hills gird themselves with joy, the meadows clothe themselves with flocks, the valleys deck themselves with grain, they shout and sing together for joy.
(NRSV)

Most North American Christians have lost such intimacy with the created world.
They are not able to immediately recognize creation as God’s self-revelation complementing familiar biblical witnesses to God’s grandeur. In fact, we have come close to obliterating much of the natural world, mar- ring it to the extent that it can barely eke out a mere whimper in praise of God’s glory rather than a “shout of joy.”

In his volume The Weather Makers: How We Are Changing the Climate, Tim Flannery stated:

In effect, 1986 marks the year that humans reached Earth’s carrying capacity, and ever since we have been running the environmental equivalent of a deficit budget, which is only sustained by plundering our capital base. The plundering takes the form of overexploiting fisheries, overgrazing pastures until they be- come deserts, destroying forests, and polluting our oceans and atmosphere, which in turn leads to the large numbers of environmental issues we face. In the end though, the environ- mental budget is the only one that really counts. (Flannery, 246, cited in McFague, 20)

The most egregious effect of this benchmark plundering is the starvation of millions of our sisters and brothers across the globe and the irreversible damage that has been wreaked upon the bioregions of the world.

Most difficult for us Westerners to grasp is that this ecological crisis has come about in the name of what the Enlightenment vision called “progress” and “good”? In fact, North American and European social, political, and economic systems are deeply rooted in Enlightenment thinking that valued the individual over the communal. That worldview and moral vision also allowed humans to be lords over nature. Humanity was to civilize and tame the wild world, using its vast resources to satiate every human desire. Unfortunately, because for generations the Earth’s hardy resilience masked the damage being done to its eco- systems, most people were blinded by the short-term gains or “true goods” to the long- term evils that have been lurking just around the corner.

Indeed the losses column in the earth’s communal ecological budget has been growing geometrically. We in the United States generously contributed to that debt, feasting in opulence. Though we represent only 5 percent of the global population, we con- sume at least 25 percent or more of the world’s resources (McFague, 155)! Pollution, unsustainable agriculture, reliance upon unsustainable energy sources and more—all these things undermine the earth’s ability to support us.

The Food Crisis: An Occasion for Ecological Conversion

As my grandmother would say, “We’re in quite a mess!” One indicator of this “mess” is the current world “food crisis.” This space allows me to only indicate several of the complex and interlocking causes of this catastrophe (see Maryknoll News Notes). First, there was the liberalization of agriculture during the debt crisis of the 1980s that resulted in a decrease in local food produc- tion and a huge increase in food imports for many countries.

Land use changed from small sustainable food-crop farming to giant agribusiness op- erations and monocrop farming. Overtaxed depleted soils increasingly required petro- based fertilizers. Additionally, biofuel pro- duction began replacing food production. In the United States, a total of forty-eight mil- lion tons of corn were consumed in 2007 over and above what was consumed in pre- vious years. The manner in which those tons were consumed changed as well. Rather than all of the corn being consumed as food,
thirty tons were now consumed in ethanol production and only eighteen tons were consumed as food.

Climate change also affects the food crisis. Dry regions of the globe are becoming drier. There are longer droughts and more frequent and destructive fires, and wetter places are becoming wetter, causing flooding and crop loss.

The weight of this data leaves us feeling overwhelmed, depressed, or even angry—and that is good! Such feelings indicate the moral sensitivity of a Christian disciple! Yet it is tempting to simply deny or ignore these realities and to escape into even more destructive behaviors. But that’s not what Christians are called to do!

Church teaching is clear about the immorality of damaging the environment and destroying the earth’s ecosystems. Indeed, on March 10, 2008, Archbishop Girootti of the Vatican Office of the Apostolic Penitentiary listed “ecological” offences among the “New Forms of Social Sin” (see Hickman). Earlier, the late Pope John Paul II called us to “ecological conversion.” He admonished that what is

... at stake ... is not only a physical ecology that is concerned to safeguard the habitat of the various living beings, but also a “human” ecology which makes the existence of creatures more dignified, by protecting the fundamental good of life in all its manifestations, and by preparing for future generations, an environment more in conformity with the Creator’s plan.

In their 2001 statement, Global Climate Change: A Plea for Dialogue, Prudence and the Common Good, the U.S. Catholic bishops called for “a civil dialogue and prudent and constructive action to protect God’s precious gift of the earth’s atmosphere with a sense of genuine solidarity and justice for all God’s children” (see the conclusion). The hope is that we know what significant life changes we must make toward halting global warming now!

However, beyond employing green technologies, the biggest “fix” that is needed is the transformation of the human heart and engagement of a lively moral imagination. Here is where St. Francis of Assissi, the patron of ecology, can help us.

A Franciscan View of the Earth

Only after his conversion, Celano tells us, did St. Francis truly delight in creation. Falling in love with Christ drastically shifted Francis’s capacity to see and to know. Then, as Bonaventure tells us, “In beautiful things he contuited Beauty itself . . . [and he] savored in each and every creature that fontal goodness” (596–97). The deep connection Francis experienced with the land and all of creation is best expressed in his Canticle of Brother Sun. Let’s look particularly at his verse about “our Sister, Mother Earth.”

First and foremost this work is a praise of God. Repeatedly, Francis used the Italian preposition per meaning “through” to indicate that it is God’s fecundity and generous love poured out in creation and the verdancy it bears forth. Francis used a “double feminine” image to express this praise given to God through the earth itself. This image of the Tellus Mater, representing the earth as soil, is a primeval notion. Francis takes things further, however. He repeats some ancient connections: the earth “feeds us” and “provides various fruits,” but typical of God’s opulent generosity, the earth also provides us with “colorful flowers and herbs”! As a bonus, our whole person is given a feast for the eye and the heart—the earth’s adornment reaches to the depth of the oceans and to the heights of the entire cosmos!

But lest we miss the point, Francis also calls the earth “sister.” Here Francis’s real
point is to establish the deeper relationship between God, humanity, and the earth. “Sister” does not diminish the powerful understanding of “mother.” However, it does convey that the earth stands among the creatures, and she is not the ultimate singular source of life.

As co-creatures with our sister, Mother Earth, we are called to live together with her, with one another, all earth-creatures, the entire cosmos, and God in a relationship of cosmic mutuality. Such relationships are precisely the challenge of Franciscan theology and ethics for our day. In our ecologically threatened world, we must “confess to Almighty God” the times when we have used and abused the earth, seeking material security and desiring god-like power. Such moments have contributed to the global conditions leading to the present food crisis. We have harmed the earth—committing sororicide, matricide, and even suicide—killing off our sister, Mother Earth, and endangering our own existence. We can take this Lenten season to repent for the times we have been inhospitable, arrogant, and wasteful of Earth’s gifts. With St. Francis we are called to live out the virtue of humility, to protect and preserve the earth and all creatures, which in their beauty and complexity draw us in, give us joy, inspire us to praise, and lead us to the heart of God.

References


