



A Franciscan theological statement on green pilgrimage

A Call to Communion with Creation - A Franciscan Theology of the Environment and Pilgrimage

St. Francis was born and died in the Umbrian town of Assisi in Italy. From his conversion in 1204 he dedicated himself to God and to a life of prayer, simplicity and preaching. He exemplified a reliance on God for everything and for his ever-present awareness of God in all of creation. His theology challenged the established church then, and continues to do so today, by asking us all to consider the natural world as our brothers and sisters and to treat all of life with love and respect.

Throughout his life he walked through Umbria inspiring others to see his simple life as a way to connect personally with God. By preaching to birds, befriending wolves and rescuing fish, he demonstrated his belief that God is present in all of his creation and we are duty bound to show kindness and restraint in our treatment of the natural world.

Pilgrimage is at the heart of Franciscan spirituality, as an Order of Friars we are dedicated to spreading the Word of God through our lives of poverty, chastity and obedience. It is therefore fitting that the birthplace of St Francis, Assisi is one of the founding cities of the Green Pilgrimage Network.

In St. Francis of Assisi, we are reminded of our union with all of creation. That union is rooted in God's voluntary poverty, revealed in God's compassionate self-donation. This incredible generosity began with the act of creating the cosmos, and reached its high point in the person of Jesus Christ, first through the Incarnation and then in the Paschal Mystery. Centuries before the Second Vatican Council, Francis was able to recognise the Eucharist as "the source and summit" of the Church's life. It became for him the definitive symbol of our communion with God, one another, and the whole of creation.



The Basilica of St Francis, Assisi

We have become accustomed to thinking of the liturgy, the Church's act of public service, as a locus for our action on behalf of justice and peace. Francis' reflections on the Eucharist and the elements of sacrament – the integration of action, word and the things of the earth challenge us to also make it a locus for our action on behalf of the integrity of creation. These reflections also invite us to consider creation as a sacrament, with God speaking, acting and creating something new from a formless wasteland and wind-swept waters (Genesis 1: 1-2:4). Franciscan Scholars emphasise creation and our communion with God as the results of God's initiative. They see creation and communion as a consequence of the divine nature itself.

Franciscan theology of creation takes as its starting point the Trinity of love. Creation is a limited expression of the infinite and dynamic love between the Father and the Son. To say that creation flows out of the infinite fountain of divine love is to say that God is creative and loving. In order for divine glory to be consciously expressed, God creates human beings who are capable of participating in and manifesting that glory. Thus God freely creates a glorious universe and calls forth within this universe human persons who are endowed with the freedom to participate in this divine artistic splendour. Responding to this generous invitation demands that we enter more deeply into contemplation.

Francis was the consummate pilgrim. He was not a monk, nor did he ever live in a monastery. He saw “the world as his cloister”. In this way he came to see God in creation because he contemplated God in the things of creation that he encountered on his own pilgrimage through life. “Contemplation is a penetrating gaze that gets to the truth of reality.”

Our deeper understanding of the communion of creation increases our consciousness of our interdependence. It also requires that we develop a more holistic understanding of our world, avoiding destructive dualisms (humanity vs. nature, spiritual vs. material, etc.) and the compartmentalisation that has even contaminated our own work when we have failed to integrate environmental concerns with our work for justice and peace.