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Laudato Sí
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In Pope Francis' most recent encyclical, ***On Care for Our Common Home (Laudato Sí),*** he asks "every person living on this planet" to begin an inclusive dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet. Pope Francis calls upon the Church and the world to acknowledge the urgency of our environmental challenges and to join him in embarking on a new path.

In this issue, ***Rochester Franciscan Sisters Joan Brown, Dawn Nothwehr and Rafael Tilton*** encourage this dialogue within the Franciscan community and beyond, in hopes that each individual will reflect on the Pope's message, and determine their own actions to continue to "care for all creation."

Reflections from the United Nations Conference on Climate Change | Paris, December 2015

by Joan Brown, OSF

Sister Joan Brown (on right) with friend, Odile, at COP21

How does one begin to talk about or write about what may be the most important agreement for the entire world? The United Nations Climate Change Agreement, negotiated by 195 nations, passed in December 2015 at the UN Conference of Parties (COP21) in Paris.

Pope Francis' poignant statement about climate change, reported on by National Catholic Reporter as COP21 began, sets a startling and true context. (NCR, Nov 30, Francis: World close to suicide over climate change).

"Every year, the problems are more grave" and yet politicians have "done little." "We are at the limit. We are at the limit of a suicide to say a strong word," he said.

But, his statement was on the heels of the influential encyclical *Laudato Sí: On Care of Our Common Home*, which was unveiled in June and followed by statements on the moral imperative to act on climate change by other influential leaders from major religious traditions.

I was privileged to be present at the historic UN Climate Change meeting in Paris, or COP21. The Rochester Franciscans sponsored my trip and Franciscans International, an NGO at the UN, offered me the opportunity to be an official delegate within the COP meeting. Official

delegates meet with negotiating parties, attend some sessions, press conferences and seminars while working with other NGO's of the civil society.

The presence of civil society and faith leaders was significant at the meeting and one facilitator of the negotiations said this was the first time that the ethical and moral imperative was front and center on the negotiating floor. *Laudato Sí* was noted as an important document that informed delegates before the meeting.

In reflecting upon this historic meeting and document, there are three elements for me that are a context in moving forward.

First, what symbol can hold one historic moment and lead us into the future? Most of us are part of communities or families that do not agree on spending priorities, how to raise children, politics and even the implications of and solutions for climate change. Yet, we come together across divisions over a meal, which often includes bread.

Bread was a mainstay in Paris. A bakery with a window wall faced the main thoroughfare at the official COP21 where everyone walked. Baguettes, loaves, rolls and croissants enticed passersby. A sign stated, "We bake 10,000 breads a day." Just as at our home tables, we share bread amidst differing opinions, so, too, at COP21 the world family came to an agreement around one table. Another aspect of the symbol of bread is reflected within the challenge of scripture quote, "What father/mother among you, if your daughter or son asks for bread, would give her/him a stone?" Can we offer real solutions and actions for brothers and sisters?

Jesus fed 5,000 by sharing a few loaves of bread. We have a document that is limited, but, which offers an opportunity to increase its strength through our engagement and actions. We are challenged, as was the Old Testament widow of Zarephath to take a little flour and continue to provide bread for the entire household.

Which leads to a second important take away from COP21. The agreement would never have happened without the hard work, pressure and speaking to the ethical and moral imperative by civil society and religious and lay leaders from throughout the world. It is imperative for civil society and faith communities to continue to act in their communities and push our civic leaders at all levels.

Third, there are five major points of the agreement I believe are significant in laying the foundation. Several of these elements were imperative for the developing countries.

1. Temperature target of limiting global warming to "well below 2 degrees Celsius" or 3.6 degrees Fahrenheit above pre-industrial levels with an aspirational goal of 1.5 degrees Celsius or 2.7 degrees Fahrenheit. While this is a small victory for island nations and vulnerable brothers and sisters, many believe it is nearly impossible. The motto of island nations at the COP was "1.5 to stay alive."
2. Ratchet mechanism with a timetable for countries to evaluate their emissions reductions commitments in order to increase their pledges for action. Reviews will take place every 5 years beginning in 2023, with an interim review in 2018 to possibly increase goals before the agreement goes into effect in 2023.
3. Financial assistance was extremely controversial at this COP, as in prior conferences. Previously, developed countries pledged $100 billion a year in climate aid for adaptation and mitigation by 2020. This pledge has not been fulfilled. The agreement sets a floor of $100 billion with five year reviews. Developing nations, for the first time will also offer money as they are able.
4. They sent a strong signal that fossil fuels are on their way out. While there are not specific dates set, the agreement aims toward "global peaking of greenhouse gas emissions as soon as possible." A long term goal and definition of carbon neutrality is included, even as the world works at equity and sustainability within the context of eradicating poverty.
5. Loss and damage, the concept that those who are most vulnerable have usually contributed least to the problem and the developing nations who have contributed most must be responsible, was petitioned for by faith leaders and civil society. It is a small victory that it appears in the document, even though no financial recompense or liability is included. Loss and damage will be part of ongoing discussion, evaluation and action as the world moves forward.

In the wake up statement Pope Francis made about suicide as the COP began, he noted that he had hope that the leaders would act because they care about the common good. In light of this historic agreement, the same challenge is before each of us. Can we give bread instead of stones? Can we get our hands enmeshed in flour, bake the bread of strong public policy advocacy, public witnesses for the common good, and lifestyle changes to reduce carbon emissions while standing with youth to create models of sustainable communities?

Sister Joan Brown made a presentation on this topic at Assisi Heights in early January. To view, just click on these links: Part 1, Part 2.

Laudato Sí and Me - A Call to Penance and Conversion

by Dawn M. Nothwehr, OSF

". . . Our goal is not to amass information or to satisfy curiosity, but rather to become painfully aware, to dare to turn what is happening to the world into our own personal suffering and thus to discover what each of us can do about it." Laudato Sí- Care for Our Common Home, §19

When Noah came out of the Ark, he opened his eyes and saw the whole world completely destroyed. He began crying for the world and said, "God, how could you have done this?"
God replied, "Oh Noah, how different you are from the way Abraham will be. He will argue with me on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah when I will tell him that I plan their destruction. But you, Noah, when I told you I would destroy the entire world, I lingered and delayed so that you would speak on behalf of the world. But when you knew you would be safe in the Ark, and the evil of the world did not touch you - You thought of no one but your family. And now you complain?"

Then Noah knew he had sinned.

Midrash Tankhuma, Parashat Noach[1]

In his "Testament," St. Francis tells of his response to God's call to do penance:

The Lord gave me, Brother Francis, thus to begin doing penance in this way: for when I was in sin, it seemed too bitter for me to see lepers. And the Lord Himself led me among them and I showed mercy to them. And when I left them, what had seemed bitter to me was turned to sweetness of soul and body. "The Testament" (1226), 1-3[2]

To do penance means to embrace a life of loving relationship with God, to see the world as an expression of the Creator's goodness, and to live in hope of the fulfillment of the reign of God. Francis shows us that a life of penance is a journey of faith that climaxes in conversion, a new way of knowing, and a greater sensitivity to the voice of God within ourselves and all of creation. Most importantly, this conversion leads to action.

Embracing a Leper Today

In St. Francis's day, lepers presented complex and daunting public health issues that were not fully understood by ordinary people. Thus, lepers were feared, outcast, and denied their full dignity as human persons. None-the-less, such ignorant, anxiety-based hostile behavior was idolatrous and insulted God's gift of the divine image, which is at the root of human dignity. In that context, Giovanni Francesco di Bernardone's actual encounter and embrace of a leper was extraordinarily significant. By embracing a leper Giovanni took the first steps on his journey to discover his true vocation and authentic Christian identity. I believe that we are being called to make a similar embrace today.

Just as Francis's embrace of the leper allowed him to see the truth about that person suffering from leprosy, and to subsequently reverence the dignity of all lepers and love them into life, so too, we must embrace the truth concerning our suffering planet Earth - and those most burdened by poverty because God's creation is so ravaged. Only when we love deeply enough to make such an embrace, will we be able to radically change our treatment of God's creation. Like Francis, we too must be converted internally and spiritually - shifting our dispositions and attitudes; but also externally and morally - changing our behaviors and practices in daily life. We already know what needs to change. The question is - when will you and I make this embrace?

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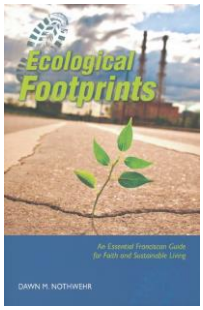
[1] Midrash Tankhuma, Parashat Noach, in Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life, To Till and to Tend:" A Guide to Jewish Environmental Study and Action (New York: Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life, 1995),3,6.
[2] See Francis's "The Testament" (1226), 1-3, in Regis J. Armstrong, J. A. Wayne Hellmann, and William J. Short, eds., Francis of Assisi: Early Documents, vol. I, The Saint (New York: New City Press, 1999), 124.



Sister Dawn Nothwehr is the author of the book,
Ecological Footprints, An Essential Franciscan Guide for Faith and Sustainable Living

Stewardship of Our Gifts

by Barbara DeCramer, Director of Development

Every day, I offer prayers of gratitude for the kind donors who share their gifts with the Sisters of Saint Francis. It's because of your generosity that the activities and efforts highlighted in this newsletter are possible. Your gifts to the Franciscan Ministries Fund help support Sister Joan and so many other Sisters in their important work. Gifts to the Retirement Fund provide safety and quality of life for Sisters living at Assisi Heights, like the gardeners who don't ever really retire!

Our Franciscan spirituality directs us to be careful stewards of our surroundings. Your gifts allow the necessary updates and repairs to keep Assisi Heights, home of the Sisters, in good repair. Two current projects at Assisi Heights are the restoration of the beautiful stained glass windows in Lourdes Chapel, and repairs to the Inner Courtyard.

You've read about our stained glass restoration project in a previous issue of the Interchange. We are happy to report that four of the eleven panels of windows have undergone restoration. As funding becomes available, the remaining seven panels will be repaired.

But perhaps you haven't heard about the challenges to the statuary and surrounding gardens in the Inner Court. The structure at the center of the Inner Court that supports a statue of Saint Francis and contains the flower gardens is slowly sinking into the ground, compromising the stonework. Repair will involve rebuilding the stone structure, putting in a drain to prevent future erosion and expansion, and the re-positioning of the statue. This project is on hold until funding becomes available.

For many years, through the grace of God and through careful management of finances, the Sisters of Saint Francis have positioned themselves to meet projected obligations while continuing to minister to those most in need.

We invite your gift to the Chapel Fund or the Inner Court project as we continue to be good stewards of our buildings and grounds. Thank you for your generous gifts that allow us to care for our Sisters and maintain our surroundings.

For more information on these projects, contact Barb DeCramer, Director of Development at Assisi Heights, (507) 282-7441, or barb.decramer@rochesterfranciscan.org.

Caring for Creation at Assisi Heights

as compiled by Rafael Tilton, OSF

Many of us Franciscans of Rochester, Minnesota, came from this state - a verdant agricultural area. So it's no wonder that many of us grew up gardening. And it is no surprise that fresh vegetables from the gardens at Assisi Heights have become an integral part of our religious life. **Sister Martha Mathew** is one of the several regulars who tend to the fenced half acre, known as the Umbrian Gardens. She says, "Recently, I've begun gardening in earnest. I've learned there is more to be gained than the harvest. Although that is the main goal, a fruitful harvest depends on nutritious soil, good seeds, proper planting, and daily care."

Sister Mary Frederick appreciates the way Pope Francis, in his encyclical, *Laudato Sí*, sums up the mystery of God's love. "He alerts me to respect what our Creator has given to us and how we come together to take charge of the common home which has been entrusted to us."

Sister Alice Thraen, having gone from large-scale farming to gardening, has learned how important darkness is to gardening, as well as what types of soil, amounts of moisture, and variations in temperature have to do with the growing process. "I'm intrigued," she says, "with how a tiny black speck can produce a beautiful flower, a fruit, or a grain; not to mention the patience and perseverance that are part of waiting for plants to grow, bloom, and produce."

Sister LaDonna Maier finds a connection between gardening and God's overall plan. "God created the good ground of our bodies, souls, and the earth. Gardening is 'choosing the better part.' It helps me to occupy my mind with prayer and positive thoughts, as well to plan which flowers will adorn the altar and feed Sister Alice's bees."

Looking past our immediate environment, **Sister Joy Barth**, who does the early nurturing of cabbages to be transplanted, adds, "A garden speaks to me of the variety of people created by God, each one with its character and contribution."

For **Sister Claren Sellner**, the microcosm of the garden mirrors the macrocosm of the universe. "Gardening is the joy of touching, the artistry of putting seeds carefully into the soil, feeling the black, rich loam, watching, stems and leaves come forth from Mother Earth, measuring their growth and the plenty of harvest."

It's like, in our garden we need to be on our guard or weeds will invade and take their toll," says Sister Joy, "just like evils in our world."

"Yes," says **Sister Rafael Tilton**, "In the book of Genesis, in the World-after-Eden, Adam and Eve raised a herder and a gardener. And in our own day, we still need to learn the lesson that Cain, the gardener, teaches. It's resentfulness that messes up everything. I must be on my watch for the anger or jealousy that could come because of the time it takes to garden, the hard labor and the need for help at weeding time. Both herders and gardeners have responsibility for our livelihood. I like to garden, but my gardening teaches me to bear no grudges and take no revenge. Joy in the earth blesses us with patience. We walk the path, knowing earth demands benevolent love, thanksgiving, and peace within. This cannot be without divine power, sunshine and water, prayer and thanksgiving, as the food on our plate shows forth the blessings of love."

"Just look around," says **Sister Alice**, "at the flowers in all their uniqueness. They add blessings to the beauty of the garden. Through their interconnectedness, they enrich the whole universe. So, too, it is that we, as members of a Community, enrich, enhance, and strengthen our broken world."

Sharing the abundant harvest of 2015, from left to right: Sisters Alice Thraen, Mary Frederick, Martha Mathew, Joy Barth and LaDonna Maier

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