

THE CRY OF THE EARTH. Franciscan Perspectives on Ecological Conversion

Dear Brother,

I must thank you for asking me to say something to you this morning, because in this way I have been obliged to reflect deeply on a theme that is very important now in the world, in the Church and in the Order, and which is important for me to focus on from the Franciscan point of view. Also, I would like to tell you right away that I am happy to be here with you, a brother among brothers, because we have known each other for a long time and now we can be in relationship, I would say, with an extra gear, broadening our view of the whole Order and not only of the Italian Provinces.

You have asked me to reflect with you on the cry of the Earth in order to seek Franciscan perspectives on ecological conversion. This is a challenging theme since I do not know how much we are really facing, because we are starting to become aware of this lament of the Earth and also of the fact that we are called to respond to it from within our life of faith and charism and not only in a functional and pragmatic way. Reflecting on this, I decided to start from the Cantic of the Creatures and, particularly, from its point of origin, which is thus identified by scholars:

The Assisi Compilation at number 83 tells us that the Cantic of the Creatures is born from the unspeakable joy of the certitude, that is, of the divine assurance of salvation that opens before Francis' inner eye the vision of a transfigured world, where the radiant splendor of the sun penetrates things, the sky, the air, the water, the earth has new voices and transparencies that allow a glimpse of the face of God. The cantic and therefore the hymn of a man saved, redeemed, transfigured. He is the one who can recognize in all things the transparency of a greater light.¹

In Christian terms, therefore, the cry of our Mother Earth - our common home - says that this creation is inhabited by a human being who does not live as a saved, redeemed person, but rather as a predator, a master, a murderer. And this imbalance of the human creature is reflected on a cosmic level, because we are all interconnected and interdependent, as *Laudato Si* has explicitly told us and *Fratelli Tutti* has powerfully echoed.

The cry of the Earth, then, expresses, first of all, the suffering, that groaning of creation which the Letter to the Romans speaks and which says an incompleteness of creation, of that original project of God, open to a fulfillment that is not intra-worldly, but comes from above. The cry of the Earth, in a certain sense, is part of the game of life and history of this planet. As Christians, we cannot think of eliminating it completely, as if the Kingdom of God could be totally realized here and now. In fact, we are on a journey, pilgrims and strangers, who are oriented towards a fullness that is a gift and not a human conquest. We can anticipate this fullness – we must do so.

We already find here the juncture between our reading and that of some forms of environmentalism. It is not a question of seeing nature as a reality that must remain intact and man would simply be guilty of wanting to undermine this "virgin" reality. Our perspective of conversion starts from the human heart and from a realistic and profound knowledge of the disorder, of the imbalance that inhabits, together with the human creature, the whole of creation. At the same time,

¹C. Paolazzi, "Lode a Dio Creatore e *Cantico di frate Sole*", in *ANTONIANUM* 4/2019, 770

we know that this reality does not have the last word, but that redemption has taken place and is accomplished in Christ, the Firstborn of every creature and the Recapitulator of all creatures. He is the point of equilibrium, finally accomplished, who already inhabits reality and moves it towards the manifestation of its fullness. Conversion, then, is primarily to recognize this presence that animates every creature: the glorious humanity of Christ, the Incarnate Word, is in fact the point at which there is already synthesis, reconciliation, the possibility for our earthly human matter to burst into God.

This has already happened in Jesus Christ. From Baptism to Confirmation and to the Eucharist, the Sacraments in which human matter is permeated by the Spirit of the Lord, all these has begun for us and is growing towards the Kingdom. We are already on the way to fulfillment, through a historical, and therefore partial, realization of the desire and groaning rather than of satisfaction and achievement.

Conversion then, first of all, is to allow the glorious and luminous fullness of Christ's Easter to expand in us and express itself in all its fullness in us, not only individually, as we are rather accustomed to thinking and feeling, but as humanity, in the cosmos, in the world itself.

Looking at St. Francis, his first biographer testifies to us that before listening to the cry of the Earth, St. Francis listened to the hymn that rises from the Earth and sings its beauty. So let us start from here, from the good, the beautiful, the positive that is sown in creation.

To enumerate and recount all the things our glorious father Francis did and taught while living in the flesh would be a lengthy or an even impossible task. Who could ever express the deep affection he bore for all things that belong to God? Or who would be able to tell of the sweet tenderness he enjoyed while contemplating in creatures the wisdom, power, and goodness of the Creator? From this reflection he often overflowed with amazing, unspeakable joy as he looked at the sun, gazed at the moon, or observed the stars in the sky. What simple piety! What pious simplicity! Even for worms he had a warm love, since he had read this text about the Savior: I am a worm and not a man. That is why he used to pick them up from the road and put them in a safe place so that they would not be crushed by the footsteps of passersby. What shall I say about the other lesser creatures? In the winter he had honey or the best wine put out for the bees so that they would not perish from the cold. He used to extol the artistry of their work and their remarkable ingenuity, giving glory to the Lord. With such an outpouring, he often used up an entire day or more in praise of them and other creatures.²

We find an echo of this positive inspiration in *Laudato Si*:

I do not want to write this Encyclical without turning to that attractive and compelling figure, whose name I took as my guide and inspiration when I was elected Bishop of Rome. I believe that Saint Francis is the example par excellence of care for the vulnerable and of an integral ecology lived out joyfully and authentically. He is the patron saint of all who study and work in the area of ecology, and he is also much loved by non-Christians. He was particularly concerned for God's creation and for the poor and outcast. He loved, and was deeply loved for his joy, his generous self-giving, his openheartedness. He was a mystic and a pilgrim who lived in simplicity and in wonderful harmony with God, with others, with nature and with himself. He shows us just how inseparable the bond is between concern for nature, justice for the poor, commitment to society, and interior peace.³

² *ICel* 39, 80, FF 458

³ *LS* 10.

It is with the spirit of being a pilgrim and a stranger that Francis crosses this world, recognizing in it the presence of contradiction and the fountain of God's goodness:

This happy traveler, hurrying to leave the world as the exile of pilgrimage, was helped, and not just a little, by what is in the world. Toward the princes of darkness, he certainly used it as a field of battle. Toward God, however, he used it as the clearest mirror of goodness.

In art he praises the Artist; whatever he discovers in creatures he guides to the Creator. He rejoices in all the works of the Lord's hands, and through their delightful display he gazes on their life-giving reason and cause. In beautiful things he discerns Beauty Itself; all good things cry out to him: "The One who made us is the Best." Following the footprints imprinted on creatures, he follows his Beloved everywhere; out of them all he makes for himself a ladder by which he might reach the Throne.⁴

Here is the cry that Francis hears from the Earth: the first conversion is therefore to the goodness impressed in all creatures, as an imprint of the Creator. Do not treat creation as something to be used and dominated, but as a true sacrament, a transparency of that presence of Trinitarian love spread everywhere. In this light we grasp the profound meaning of our relationship with creation:

He embraces all things with an intensity of unheard devotion, speaking to them about the Lord and exhorting them to praise Him. He spares lanterns, lamps, and candles unwilling to use his hand to put out their brightness which is a sign of the eternal light. He walked reverently over rocks, out of respect for Him who is called the Rock. When he came to the verse "You have set me high upon the rock," in order to express it more respectfully, he would say: "You have set me high under the feet of the Rock."

When the brothers are cutting wood, he forbids them to cut down the whole tree, so that it might have hope of sprouting again. He commands the gardener to leave the edges of the garden undisturbed, so that in their season the green of herbs and the beauty of flowers may proclaim the beautiful Father of all. He even orders that within the garden a smaller garden should be set aside for aromatic and flowering herbs so that those who see them may recall the memory of eternal savor.

He picks up little worms from the road so they will not be trampled underfoot. That the bees not perish of hunger in the icy winter, he commands that honey and the finest wine should be set out for them. He calls all animals by a fraternal name, although, among all kinds of beasts, he especially loves the meek. Who is capable of describing all of this? Truly, that fountain-like goodness, which will be all in all, already shone clearly in all for this saint.⁵

In this unique relationship with God's creation, Francis knows a threefold movement⁶:

1. **Knowing.** To see that God alone is good⁷, that God is "the good, all good, the supreme good"⁸.

2. **Recognizing.** When we see strength goodness, beauty and truth in creatures recognize that all goodness comes from God, an expression of his truth and love.

⁴ *2Cel* 165, FF 750.

⁵ *2Cel* 165, FF 750.

⁶ Assumo da C. Paolazzi, "Lode a Dio Creatore e *Cantico di frate Sole*", in *ANTONIANUM* 4/2019, 771-72.

⁷ Cfr. *Lk* 18,19.

⁸ *LodAlt*, 3, FF 261.

3. **Restitution.** Knowing that God is the Good, the source of every other good, Francis' way of giving everything back to Him is praise: "And we give back to the Lord God, most high and supreme, all goods, and we recognize that all goods are his, and we give thanks to him for all goods, from whom all good proceeds⁹."

In this movement, I seem to me, I can recognize many steps of ecological conversion for us Franciscans.

Ecological Conversion as Knowing - Learning a Renewed Sense of Faith

First, those who want to change need to listen in order to know what needs to be changed. In this sense, listening first to God. Ecological conversion truly becomes a chapter of our faith in God in this time. We have most often thought of creation at most as a ladder to get to God and once we reached him, the underlying thought might have been that we no longer needed that ladder. A correct theology of the Incarnation instead makes us aware that humanity for Christ is not just a tool but is the place where the Father reveals himself. Therefore, creation and all creatures in it are not just a ladder to reach something above, but it is in them that we can recognize the fontal goodness of God, learn to know it in a new way in and through all things. Laudato Si says:

God has written a precious book, "whose letters are the multitude of created things present in the universe". The Canadian bishops rightly pointed out that no creature is excluded from this manifestation of God: "From panoramic vistas to the tiniest living form, nature is a constant source of wonder and awe. It is also a continuing revelation of the divine". The bishops of Japan, for their part, made a thought-provoking observation: "To sense each creature singing the hymn of its existence is to live joyfully in God's love and hope". This contemplation of creation allows us to discover in each thing a teaching which God wishes to hand on to us, since "for the believer, to contemplate creation is to hear a message, to listen to a paradoxical and silent voice". We can say that "alongside revelation properly so-called, contained in sacred Scripture, there is a divine manifestation in the blaze of the sun and the fall of night". Paying attention to this manifestation, we learn to see ourselves in relation to all other creatures: "I express myself in expressing the world; in my effort to decipher the sacredness of the world, I explore my own"¹⁰.

In an entirely connected reality, knowing in creatures the manifestation of God leads man to recognize himself in a new way. In this way, ecological conversion outlines a true spiritual itinerary, new for us, yet so close to our spirituality.

Some will immediately feel the danger of pantheism. Clearly, this is not the Pope's intention, nor is it ours in Franciscan theology. Knowing God in and through all creatures calls for a contemplative gaze, a profound contemplative attitude. At the end of the day, it is a question of thinking not of a transcendence separated from the world, totally other in the sense of extraneous, but, in a certain sense, of an immanent transcendence and a transcendent immanence. That is to say that every creature manifest something of the mystery that inhabits it and that we call God.

Creatures are not to be looked upon simply as things to be safeguarded at all costs or used, but as a living being that bears witness to the presence of the living. Evidently this is also a great place for a renewed proclamation of faith in a time like ours that sees the sense of God, for many, simply eclipsed in favor of a cosmic spirituality that nonetheless recognizes the mystery present

⁹ *Rnb* XVII, 17-18, FF 49.

¹⁰ *LS*, 85.

everywhere. We have points of contact with the men and women of our time who feel this way and we can present our sense of God and his presence in the world in a new way.

From here, we understand how knowing in this sense makes the concern, defense and promotion of life, based on the values of the Kingdom expressed in the Gospels, grow in us. We can be encouraged to translate these values into human dignity and defense of life. This is intrinsically linked to the fact that everyone can become a person in an ever more fulfilled way. These are practical matters, which sometimes are not immediately linked to the Gospel. For example, the defense of water, which makes life possible, the promotion of an economy of solidarity that does not seek only the accumulation of goods. The search for justice as a way to peace.

Ecological Conversion as Recognizing - Learning to Listen (Re-learning)

A second step of conversion is to learn to recognize through listening, the beauty, the truth and the life that inhabits the world. And recognizing that all these come from God is not just an intrinsic quality of creatures. This ability to listen is essential to recognize and is a great conversion step if we think about it well. The *Fratelli Tutti* tells us:

The ability to sit down and listen to others, typical of interpersonal encounters, is paradigmatic of the welcoming attitude shown by those who transcend narcissism and accept others, caring for them and welcoming them into their lives. Yet “today’s world is largely a deaf world... At times, the frantic pace of the modern world prevents us from listening attentively to what another person is saying. Halfway through, we interrupt him and want to contradict what he has not even finished saying. We must not lose our ability to listen”. Saint Francis “heard the voice of God, he heard the voice of the poor, he heard the voice of the infirm and he heard the voice of nature. He made of them a way of life. My desire is that the seed that Saint Francis planted may grow in the hearts of many”¹¹

This recognition that orients us to listen in a new way, touches our language in a particular way: are we able to distinguish when terms such as "before "us " and "them" are used in language? Does this attitude truly dispose us to listen? As lesser brothers we are called rather to place ourselves "in the midst of", "among others", in a "we". From here comes the encouragement among us to look at integral ecology as a holistic value that manages to situate us starting from what we are: "brothers and minors".

Linked to creatures as brothers, we recognize ourselves in an attitude of service, of those who stand at the bottom to serve and not at the top to manipulate and dominate. If we manage to overcome the idea that we are outside the world or beyond it, we will certainly manage to overcome the idea that climate change, for example, would take place far from us, "in another world".

If we always think that the migratory crisis is happening only in Lampedusa and outside the wall of the United States or other countries, probably we are too innocent - uncritical - in front of the media and we have not made a process of listening outside our door.

If we think that ecology has nothing to do with our ordinary pastoral action, we have a very narrow idea of the latter. It would be, in fact, only the action addressed to the people who are already in the Christian community, thus a small circle. We do not know how to go towards the distant, from where to start. Ecology, proclaimed and practiced in this integral sense for us, is a great bridge, a place of value, because today the sensitivity of many in this regard is on and it is a sign of the times to be recognized and discerned.

¹¹ FT, 48.

It is hardly a question of using ecology as a bridgehead to enter into foreign, if not enemy, territory. Instead, it is a matter of recognizing that we are right at the heart of a concern for a sensibility that evangelizes us and allows us to speak and recognize the mystery of God today in a new way. For this reason, the correct perspective of integral ecology belongs to our life and mission as Friars Minor and awaits further development.

Ecological Conversion as Restitution - Formation to Praise and Blessing

The third step of ecological conversion is in restitution. We do not want to be environmentalists who are always angry at everyone. The care of creation is not our possession, but the recognition and restitution of all that is good and beautiful in the world to God and thus to the fullness of life of peoples. This attitude of praise and gratitude, biblically speaking the blessing, makes us recognize that everything comes from God and returns to him. Through blessing, we can learn to live not as masters of reality, but as those who receive everything as a gift that is to be returned. For now, I would like to highlight two ways of this restitution:

Formation. In order to make integral ecology, a value that becomes part of our life and mission in a more dynamic way, it is necessary to consider the contribution that can be made by the brothers of the Order who have specialized in social and economic sciences. This is without neglecting theologians and their various specializations. For the future, the friars can be encouraged to take care of the continuity of specialization with the friars of the new generations. We must keep interdisciplinarity in mind and cultivate it much more. The epistemological statute of integral ecology demands it, and we realize that it is increasingly necessary for our theological knowledge as well, otherwise it would be too closed in on itself, self-referential as we say today, therefore incapable of contacting the languages, expectations, and urgencies of people and cultures today. And if theology does not dialogue with all this, what does it do? And the same goes for our charism.

Continuity. Do not forget that integral ecology is a great perspective proposed by Pope Francis in 2015. Since 2016, the Order has been promoting integral ecology through grants and projects. In several of our provinces, this journey has now begun and many of us are witnesses to it. It is necessary, then, to provide continuity to what has been started, to learn how to plan, to enrich and to evaluate what has been done so far in the Entities of the Order. Let us not start over each time as if from scratch but let us continue and progress along the path.

Conclusion

With these notes, I wanted to open a reflection that, first of all, is useful to me in order to be able to speak to the friars of the Order about integral ecology starting from its center, the revelation and charism of Francis. It seems important to me to grasp integral ecology as a perspective, a basic dimension that helps us to revisit chapters and places of our reflection on our life in a new way, attentive to this great sign of the times that is among those we are most called to read, discern and from which to make appropriate decisions. From here come the elements of conversion, such as the change in lifestyles, truly incisive choices in our way of consuming and using the goods of the earth. And are they not as many chapters of our profession of obedience, poverty and chastity? In fact, if we want to obey the signs of the times in which the Lord manifests himself, we cannot fail to recognize and promote all that today's climate change, for example, asks of us regarding consumption, etc. If we want to learn to live *sine proprio* and not as dominators, we need a new relationship with creation in order to express this central reality of our life as lesser brothers. If we view creatures as thoughtful and chaste, a revelation of a greater mystery, we will not use them for our own selfish benefit. Integral ecology is truly a reality that we cannot sufficiently snub.

I wish all of us to continue walking in this path and to deepen it in the widest evangelical, charismatic and historical sense, directed towards new actions capable of affecting reality.

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