

# “Caring for our Common Home” by Kolya Braun-Greiner, Liz Gould-Leger, and John Morris

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## 4th Sunday of Easter – Earth Day

**Kolya:** During my years of solidarity with Native American sovereignty and land rights I stood in many prayer circles in which we gave thanks to the Creator with a long litany acknowledging the 2-leggeds, the 4-leggeds, creeping things and a myriad of other forms of Creation, and ending our prayer with “All my relations.” I used to think this understanding of the human relationship to and with all of Creation as a uniquely indigenous world view. This past Friday I was struck by Wes Granberg-Michaelson’s observation that one of his “ten challenges for reshaping Christianity” is learning to see the world through a different set of lenses” – one in

which the world is perceived as sacred. This was certainly not the view of the colonizers. However, at one time some of our ancestors were indigenous to their lands. My own Celtic heritage for example is rich with respect for the sacredness of trees, springs of water, and natural elements. So too, I have learned the deep respect for all Creation that Pope Francis' namesake, Saint Francis of Assisi had within a world view wherein the creatures and elements were addressed in relational familial terms – Brother Sun, Sister Moon, Brother Bird, Brother Wolf, etc. In this view, if all Creation comes from the same source then we are in this sense, one interconnected family of God. Laudato Si, meaning “praise be” was Saint Francis thanksgiving prayer and it is this praise with which Pope Francis calls his encyclical, the first letter from any Pope that concerns the environment.

The Pope wrote his Encyclical “Laudato Si: On Care for our Common Home” not only for Catholics but for the whole world.

In The New Yorker, James Carroll describes its significance:

The encyclical is a clear reckoning with the multifaceted climate crisis. Francis describes Earth as “an immense pile of filth” and mourns “the disappearance of thousands of plant and animal species” each year, “lost forever”; he calls access to clean water “a basic and universal human right” and notes the link between “current models of development and the throwaway culture”; he recognizes the “very solid scientific consensus” that global warming has human causes and the “ecological debt” that the global North, after centuries of market plunder and pollution, owes the less industrialized South. All of this, Pope Francis declares, causes “Sister Earth, along with all the abandoned of our world, to cry out, pleading that we take another course.”

But the dangerously degraded planet, for Francis, is a manifestation of a deeper problem, for [as he says] “we cannot presume to heal our relationship with nature and the

environment without healing all fundamental human relationships.”

Herein Pope Francis makes an inextricable link between environmental justice and social justice. He says, “We are not faced with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather one complex crisis which is both social and environmental.” Yes, it is complex and they need to be addressed simultaneously in an integrated approach. What Pope Francis calls an “Integral Ecology” frames our environmental choices within the context of solidarity with the poor. Liz will describe some of the ways she experienced the Pope’s integrated approach to understanding our relationship with imperiled Creation.

**Liz:** Just before I started to work on my brief talk, I went into my front yard. The increasing spring light had already brought out dandelions and violets among the grasses as usual; and this year, for the first time, another, tinier, unknown flower of pale purple had suddenly carpeted the bare and thin spots. It was so low to the ground that my helpful lawnmowing man, who doesn’t shave the grass but cuts high, had left them all there in their beauty. What a reminder of the diversity of this world’s biology—one aspect of Saint Francis’s and Pope Francis’s praise of the created world.

The book *Laudato Si’* impressed me with the interrelatedness of all aspects of today’s world: biology, economic ways of acting, ethical values—of societies, of large powerful entities—and, rounding out that sphere, our personal needs and wants: our society succeeds in encouraging us to want more and more, yet on the other hand we long for the natural beauty of plants and animals and for fresh air and clean water.

As an example of the interrelatedness of environmental and social issues, here are a couple of chapter 2 heads: “Decline In The Quality Of Human Life And The Breakdown Of Society.” Then, “Climate As A Common Good” turns us toward how we

can—**must**—consider our created world.

Francis also offers a view of the world through faith: for instance, sections in Chapter 2, “The Gospel of Creation: The Mystery of the Universe,” and “The Message of Each Creature in the Harmony of Creation.”

Often, in the middle of descriptions of planet crises, or destructive economic or societal systems, will appear a flash of his praise and love of the natural world. In the section “Loss of Biodiversity,” he says, “It is not enough to think of different species merely as potential ‘resources’ to be exploited, while overlooking the fact that they have value in themselves.” The plants and animals that are becoming extinct “will no longer give glory to God by their very existence, nor convey their message to us....” [Among my marginal notes, this is one where I drew a round face with downturned mouth and tears falling from the eyes.]

So: Francis goes farther than an instrumental view of nature and its creatures—including us human creatures—to one of faith in creation and one that interrelates all natural and human aspects of life here.

**Kolya:** This week’s scriptures are also rooted in a sense of place, pastoral, shepherding, tending the flock. What qualities of caring, guardianship, keen sensitivity to the needs of the flock can we translate to our own relationship to the earth. Farming and caring for animals on the farm used to be called “husbandry.” John will offer his reflections about the “good shepherd” and insights about Franciscan spirituality he gained from the class

**John:** Our gospel reading today is a familiar one, so familiar that we may be a little deaf to its strangeness, to what it’s really saying. Jesus uses the image of a good shepherd to describe himself. And then, in the very next sentence, he says this: “The good shepherd lays down his life for the

sheep.” What? Really? Have you ever heard of such a thing? Jesus makes the comparison of a hired hand versus an owner. The hired hand sees the wolf coming, and abandons the sheep and runs away. Jesus never describes what the owner does, but we have to conclude that – just as Jesus himself will do, on Golgotha – the owner is willing to lay down his own life to save the sheep.

I want to suggest that this is extraordinary. If I owned a flock of sheep, and I saw a wolf arriving, I like to think I’d do better than the hired hand. Rather than run away, I would defend the flock against the wolf, and try hard to save them. But if it came down to my life versus saving the sheep . . . I don’t think so. I would probably abandon them, because my sense of responsibility just doesn’t extend that far.

Jesus doesn’t have any direct teaching about this, and there are certainly other passages we could point to which suggest that he did not value animal life to the degree that he valued human life. But in this one, central image, Jesus is insisting that we ask a very troubling question: Who would I lay down my life for? Or, to put it another way, who am I responsible for? I think that is the point of the comparison between the hired hand and the owner, and the deepest meaning of the entire passage. The hired hand hasn’t signed on to be responsible for guarding the lives of the flock at all costs. That’s not in his job description. But, in Jesus’ telling, the owner has. If you’re going to claim that you own a flock of sheep, you’d better be ready to guard them with, literally, your life.

I believe that we are, individually and collectively, a long way from assuming that responsibility.

Kolya’s class introduced us to a theological vision in which our responsibilities to creation are absolutely central to Christianity. Pope Francis clearly sees human life as part of a precious, interconnected web of spirit here on Planet

Earth. He calls on Christians to make responsibility to Earth a core principle, as central as “Resist not evil” and “Love your brother and sister as yourself.” This is very hard to do, even if it were easy to figure out what that means in practice, which it is not. But by starting with a familiar passage like John 10, and really reading it, with fresh eyes and open heart, we may start to understand what a radical responsibility is being urged upon us. But then, Jesus was always a radical, and it did cost him his life.

**Kolya:** Liz will now share some of the ways that Pope Francis calls us to a new lifestyle as a spiritual practice of conversion.

**Liz:** As Pope Francis turns from earth’s problems to how we can change, and change the world, chapters such as “Integral Ecology” and “ Ecological Education and Spirituality” also interrelate hopeful and lifegiving points of view about ecology and how we can, each of us and in groups, act with a constant consciousness of what he calls “The Covenant Between Humanity and the Environment.” [Each month here at Seekers, I say when offering a communion cup, “this is the cup of the new covenant,” and that word has power for me.]

The last part of the book is cheering and strengthening to me as it presents visions of a new kingdom on earth and how we can work for it. A new attitude toward the redemption of the planet, he urges, is so important: let’s not plan only technological solutions to problems that were partly caused by technological attitudes. Let’s not just put out fires (and that’s a metaphor that now is, tragically, becoming literal)—but rather integrate larger solutions reaching into the future, for our children and everyone’s children. And let’s seek to be activists outside the adversarial way of acting—because we’re called by God to halt environmental degradation, “realizing that this too is part of our spirituality, an exercise of charity, and as such matures and sanctifies us.”

After presenting all these broad, complex, far-reaching ideas, he then comes down to the reality of our daily lives. [As Elisabeth Dearborn said in a poem, "The keys of the Kingdom are in the kitchen drawer."]

The Pope says, "There is a nobility in the duty to care for creation through little daily actions: changes in lifestyle"—for instance, using public transport, planting trees, buying what we need and using it all. He tells us, "We must not think that these efforts are not going to change the world. They benefit society, often unbeknown to us, for they call forth a goodness which, although unseen, inevitably tends to spread. Furthermore, such actions can restore our sense of self-esteem; they can enable us to live more fully and to feel that life on earth is worthwhile."

To feel that life on earth is worthwhile.

**Kolya:** Franciscan spirituality is rooted in 1) a bottom up perspective, not top down; it is 2) incarnational – enfleshed in this world; and experience precedes spiritual awareness. In this vein of a lived faith, Saint Francis has been credited with saying "preach the gospel often, and if necessary with words." Herein I feel thoroughly Franciscan, wishing not to talk about doing things, but rather just do them! Our class struggled with the "what to do" question. Some have chosen to take small steps forward like composting, eating less meat, carpooling to church, using less plastic. The latter is especially egregious and intractable problem which I find especially challenging. Plastic is made from oil, so it too is part of the demand on fossil fuels, and ending up widespread in the oceans. How can we disentangle our lives from plastic? Fast from plastic?

The Earth Day website: Approximately 8 million metric tons of plastic waste enters the ocean every year. The eco-theologian Fr. Sean McDonagh describes the plastic plague upon the ocean in his commentary on the Pope's Encyclical:

“The ubiquitous plastic bag also causes damage and great suffering to many marine creatures. A plastic bag bobbing up in the ocean looks like a jellyfish to a turtle. Once consumed, the plastic blocks the turtle’s intestines and causes a slow, painful death. . . . Oceanographers and ecologists have discovered that about 75 percent of the marine rubbish actually sinks to the bottom of the ocean. Both on the surface of the ocean, and on its floor, plastic does enormous damage to marine creatures.”

Our society’s overuse of single-use disposable plastics contributes to what Pope Francis calls “the throwaway culture.” The Catholic Climate Covenant (CCC) has developed a program titled *Beyond a Throwaway culture – Reduce Waste, Grow Community* for parishes, schools, and religious communities to use.

I hope that in community perhaps we can find ways to support what Pope Francis calls “Ecological Conversion” – of hearts, minds and society. With regard to a mental conversion, Calvin’s insight during the class was to recall that Einstein said “We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking that created them.” An ecological conversation can be centered in what my mentor Larry Rasmussen calls an “Earth-honoring faith.” This calls upon us the hard task of examining our lifestyle and the even more difficult challenge of changing entrenched behaviors that the consumer culture reinforces. Perhaps you can spend some time this Earth Day praying for how you might honor this earth our Common Home. How can , so every day be Earth Day?

How can we as a community bolster our capacity for being good shepherds of Creation? – as a good shepherd would, guarding from that which could disturb or decimate the flock.

Pope Francis: “Yet all is not lost. Human beings, while capable of the worst, are also capable of rising above themselves, choosing again what is good, and making a new



start.” He encourages us:

Inspired by Saint Francis, faithful to Scripture, invites us to see nature as a magnificent book in which God speaks to us and grants us a glimpse of his infinite beauty and goodness... Rather than a problem to be solved, the world is a joyful mystery to be contemplated with gladness and praise.  
~Laudato Si, #1

Or as my other mentor Joanna Macy has taught – when we ally ourselves with the world, it becomes our ally. We can draw strength from that.

I will close with a prayer from St. Francis and invite you to move your hands in response:

Our hand imbibe like roots,  
so I place them on what is beautiful in this world.

And I fold them in prayer,  
and they draw from the heavens  
light.

Amen.