



CONVERSION AND ACTION ON THE ANNIVERSARY OF *LAUDATO SÍ*

by Joe Makley OFS

Vice-Chair, National JPIC Commission and Vice-Minister, St.
Elizabeth of Hungary Regional Fraternity

It was Pope Francis, in *Laudato Si*, who said of Saint Francis: “[He showed us the] inseparable bond between concern for nature, justice for the poor, commitment to society and interior peace.”¹ He was talking about Francis’ whole life and ministry, and he wanted us to understand that these things are connected. To put it in the terms of the moment, it is difficult to stop a pandemic when large segments of the society do not have proper health insurance or clean drinking water. The spirit of *Laudato Si* is a spirit of justice and peace, integral to life in a clean and healthy Earth.

I was to attend the Ecumenical Advocacy Days in Washington at the end of April. The theme was environmental justice (on the anniversary of *Laudato Si*). After it was cancelled, I caught one of the guest speakers online, Joan Brown, Sister of Francis, who directs *New Mexico Interfaith Power and Light*, a group that works on environmental issues with native American and vulnerable populations. Her presentation called for that change of heart described in our Rule, from the temptation to exploit nature, to one of universal kinship. Sister spoke directly to how the pandemic provides an opportunity for a conversion to realize essential elements of the *Laudato Si* vision, through direct changes to our own lifestyles, and working to correct societal injustices brought to light by its stresses on our institutions. “What is our call now,” she asked, “in this mysterious moment of death and birth?”

I’ve been thinking and praying about that, as I’m sure you have. During these weeks we’ve had a close visit from Sister Death, a unique physical separation from our human families, and a pause in the bustle, under skies clearer and bluer than I

can remember seeing in decades. Whole fleets of commercial jets are parked. Even trains and buses have stopped rolling. The human costs of perpetual war, weak institutions and social inequities are placed under a bright light. Surely now we can hear the cries of those who are not in the protective bubble of the “developed” world, or its dominant groups. Surely now we can see how our own habits of consumption are connected to the problem. Surely now, we will hear God speaking to us, and our hearts will be made ready for a truer, deeper, and more complete conversion to Christ, and with our Seraphic Father St. Francis, to see all creatures, animate and inanimate, praising the Most High, to renew our gratitude for them, and to raise our voices in the same chorus.

All our popes since Pope St. John XXIII have called us to this, most recently Pope Francis, but also Pope St John Paul II in his articulate description of “human ecology” in *Centesimus Annus*.² Our Rule (p. 18) calls us to ecological conversion, universal kinship. Over the past few weeks, we have also been shown (in a new way) that we can’t do it all. So what action will we choose? How will a renewed love, a new, less stony, more natural heart for everyone and all creation, be made manifest in each one of us?

I know we are all helping to reduce suffering, through volunteer work, donations, etc., so we are already taking visible action out of love. We have been asked to work more on “root causes and structures,” so I’ll mention a few practical steps, trying to stick to things I have actually done, or someone I know has:

¹ *Laudato Si*, P. 10

² *Centesimus Annus*, pp. 37-40

- ❖ Monitor legislation at the state, local, or national level. See what is being proposed in each session and follow the OFS Rule to support just laws and oppose unjust laws, to seek the common good, to demonstrate solidarity with the marginalized. This includes contacting the diocesan public policy office and writing to or calling legislators, offering comments to legislative committees. As Kent Ferris, of the Davenport, Iowa, diocese, said at the 2019 JPIC: “If a person prefers to work directly with the poor and doesn’t like politics, that person’s voice may be the most important one the legislators hear on that day.” Like many of us, I am reluctant to trust an email alert; I need to know myself what is going on, so it takes time. In Maine, we do have a diocesan office of Public Policy, and its director, Suzanne Lafrenier, lets us know about things coming up at the state legislature if we get on her email list. Some dioceses have an office of Pro-Life or other title.
- ❖ Send thank you messages to legislators and others who work on behalf of the marginalized, the poor, and the vulnerable.
- ❖ Look for authentic dialogue opportunities. Specifically, have a respectful online discussion with, for instance, a vocal Catholic who disagrees with the Church’s activity of refugee placement. Practice that loving dialogue. Ask questions. Seek to understand. “How did you come to be at such odds with Church teaching on this?” Develop a relationship, rather than trying to “win.”
- ❖ Continue to work to get St Francis’ *Canticle of the Creatures* out there among Catholics, in print, but

especially in recital to music. The Canticle is a picture and an inspiration of *ecological conversion*. The Transitus service is a great way to feature it at a Parish. Holy Family Fraternity has a service that does this, and we’d be glad to share.

- ❖ Reduce consumption: It’s a key Franciscan lesson from the pandemic: *buying stuff can cause harm*. Buying less can be transformational. Look at what we just achieved by not buying air travel! Buying intentionally (avoiding sweatshops and child labor, choosing Fair Trade, avoiding petrochemicals, supporting worker-owned companies and coops, etc.) can make a real difference, too.
- ❖ Use less food: More rice and beans. More soup. Make things rather than buy. Fewer one-time purchases “for supper,” better planning. Food takes a lot of energy to produce and transport. David Seitz, a board member of the Franciscan Action Network, said recently of the pandemic: “I am eating healthy and spending way less money. I’m going to keep doing this!”
- ❖ Drive less. I am amazed at the lack of movement our car’s odometer. I’m partial to a road trip, but I can get used to the savings, and the substantial contribution to Mother Earth.
- ❖ Hold onto that deepened sense of gratitude for what I already have.

I think all of us have felt we would come out of this transformed. I pray that our conversion will also be a collective one, where the voice of the OFS is more unified and gains volume and is heard by those who in Pope Francis’ words “are still waiting.”

