

# FRANCISCAN LIVING

## LAUDATO SÍ: WHAT CAN I DO?

By Francine Gikow, OFS

Pope Francis recently described crucial ecological issues in his encyclical, *Laudato Sí*. He identified problems, brought a theological understanding of the issues and implored us to do something about it. Hopefully, world societies will mobilize to raise consciousness of the issues, develop consensus, make plans, offer solutions and pass laws. Whew! This will take a lot of work!

Sometimes I wonder how the world got into this mess in the first place! It starts with us, however. We tend to think about “now” rather than the impact of our actions on the future. We see ourselves for what we “do” and not who we “are.” Unfortunately, this belief trickles down to how we view nature. How can we use nature to make our lives easier or better? What can we “do” with nature, rather than appreciating it for what it *is*? This exploitation mentality has brought us to an ecological crisis, which is no longer working for us, the animals, plants or for our environment.

But how do we change this? How do people change their beliefs, worldview and behaviors? As the Australian Bishops said: “To achieve such reconciliation [with creation], we must examine our lives and acknowledge the ways in which we have harmed God’s creation through our actions and our failure to act. We need to experience a conversion, or change of heart.”

However the real unanswered question is how we can encourage this conversion, Unless we *change* people’s belief systems, values and ethics, all these efforts are doomed to failure. So we need to back up a few paces to address the underlying thoughts, beliefs and attitudes so there *is* a possibility of conversion.

Because I am not good with debates and quick thinking, I tend toward seeking interpersonal and relational solutions to problems. I have found that trying to change people’s behavior through reasoning or facts simply does not work. Truth be told, debates do not change peoples’ ideas or behaviors. In fact, debates can actually harden a person’s stance on an issue! People do not necessarily follow reason: they follow their emotions. While respecting a person’s integrity and self-determination, an honest but loving encounter can make a difference . . . a conversion.

We have all encountered the wonders of nature, I am sure, at one time or another. People describe how they encounter God when they see the grandeur of a sunset or a beautiful rainbow, or an experience with birds. These experiences can be life changing and a way to introduce us to the Almighty. As Pope Francis says: “If we approach nature and the environment without this openness to awe and wonder, if we no longer

speaking the language of fraternity and beauty in our relationship with the world, our attitude will be that of masters, consumers, ruthless exploiters, unable to set limits on their immediate needs. By contrast, if we feel intimately united with all that exists, then sobriety and care will well up spontaneously.” (*Laudato Sí*, 11)

However, this type of meaningful personal encounter is just the beginning of what I am talking about. If we go deeper into a relationship with nature, be it a common rock or insect rather than the extraordinarily beautiful, we can become aware of what is called, “essential individuation” or John Scotus’ “thisness.” It is seeing each individual piece of creation perfect and complete in its own right. Creation does not need to have a “use” or “value” for society. It is whole in itself and has an innate beauty simply because it was created by God and reflects His love. God loved it into being and because of that, it has value far surpassing anything we could want to attribute to it! It is our brother in creation since the same Father created us.

A tangible encounter with a rock or “ordinary” piece of nature can be the doorway to the universal. By using our senses, (eyes, touch, smell, hearing) we can tap into the core of our very being. It is not so much an intellectual or knowledge exercise, but a reflection on an individual piece of creation. It is designed to affect our “heart.” We have to avoid making judgments of the rock or piece of creation because then we are not seeing it as God sees it. We have to learn to appreciate and respect things for what they are . . . not for what they do, or how we can use them (for that is exploitation behavior all over again!)

We can *see* the patterns on the rock; the color, the reflections. *Feel* it: the heft, roughness, coolness, warmth or cragginess of the rock. *Smell* it: is it moist, does it smell of the forest or the beach? *Hear* it when it drops or in the silence of its being? Does it speak to you in a personal way? In modern terms, many call this “mindfulness.” We call it meditation. In this way, we encounter nature as individual and unique. We become aware that no two things in nature are exactly the same. God not only loved the rock into being but also loved it personally, individually, and specifically into being.

By sharing this meditation, we can help others to be in touch with the sacred. For “when we can see God reflected in all that exists, our hearts are moved to praise the Lord for all his creatures and to worship him in union with them.” (*Laudato Sí*, 87) From this heart knowledge we can act accordingly. We can become the seed sown on good ground that yields a hundred fold.

---

1. Australian Catholic Bishops Conference. “A New Earth-The Environmental Challenge,” 2002.