

Who Founded Earth Day?

By Sister Janet Corcoran, the Green Franciscan

St. Francis was born in Assisi, Italy in 1182 and died in 1226. He lived to be 44 years of age. One of the things remembered about Francis is his respect for all of creation, exemplified in the “Canticle of Creatures.”

St. Francis, a man both of and ahead of his time, had a special fraternal relationship with the natural and human environment; everyone and everything was brother and sister to him. Francis revered all of creation. He realized and lived out the thought that the power of the heart is greater than the power of the mind. Francis had “heart-titude” for all. In 1979, Pope John Paul II proclaimed St. Francis the Patron Saint of Ecology in the Catholic Church. St. Francis is often quoted by various philosophies and religions because of his inclusiveness and respect for all of creation. His loving heart was like a living room, which welcomed all.

Here in the United States, we have a day designated as Earth Day, which calls us to a similar reverence for all of creation. You may wonder who founded Earth Day. John McConnell submitted a proposal to the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, which was approved for the inauguration of the first Earth Day. This event took place on March 21, 1970, in the city and county of San Francisco, which coincidentally bears the name of Francis. The celebration included the raising of the Earth Flag, which portrays our beautiful blue planet.

Another environmentally friendly gentleman, the late Senator Gaylord Nelson, was an originator of the National Earth Day, which evolved over a period of time, starting in 1962. Senator Nelson was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom for his role as the Earth Day founder. During the summer of 1969, while flying from Santa Barbara to Berkeley. In the spring of 1970, he announced that a nationwide Earth Day would take place on April 22, 1970. This first national Earth Day brought together over 20 million people across the United States to participate in activities that demonstrated and promoted a healthy, sustainable environment. Since that time, Earth Day is most often celebrated on April 22, but some people observe it on other days, i.e., the first day of spring, which is March 21st.

St. Francis, John McConnell, and Senator Gaylord Nelson are to be commended for their role in seeking to instill in others a respect and reverence for Sister Mother Earth. May we, too, follow in their footsteps by reusing, reducing, recycling, and conserving the goods of our sister, Mother Earth.