

Integrity of Creation Our Precious Earth

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St. Francis and the Life Sciences agree that the creatures of the earth live in a dynamic relationship with one another. *The Canticle of the Creatures* sings of creation's familial, interdependent system. All of the elements have a particular role, all are related, and all have a part to interplay with each other. Biology and Ecology confirm this through scientific means. Francis celebrated these insights long ago, in medieval times. He recognized creation as good and lived out conscious relationships with the elements and creatures and had compassion toward them. His example inspires us to care for creation today.

Unlike other medieval saints, St. Francis was profoundly impacted by his encounters with creatures. The story of his preaching to the birds illustrates this point well. Most modern people are tickled to discover a saint who preached to creatures, but the most important lesson from this encounter is what happened after he preached to the birds and they flew away. Thomas of Celano wrote, "After the birds had listened so reverently to the Word of God, Francis began to accuse himself of negligence because he had not preached to them before. From that day on, he carefully exhorted all birds, all animals, all reptiles, and also insensible creatures, to love the Creator, because daily, invoking the name of the Savior, he observed their obedience in his own experience." It was after this encounter that he "woke up" and recognized that they were his brothers and sisters, as well. In the same way, we may ask, how do we relate to this richly diverse earth as brother and sister?

The relationship between Francis and the earth was horizontal, not vertical. He did not speak of being responsible for or managing creation. Francis and Franciscan theologians describe the earth and its diversity as *sacramental*.

Life on earth has intrinsic value, because it is created by God, not merely because of its economic worth. The vast majority of species appear to serve no genuinely functional purpose for humans. What value does a useless creature have in modern society where most things are ranked according to its economic worth? If an endangered species has no economic value, who will speak on behalf of its survival?

At its deepest root, our ecological crisis is derived from our belief that humans are somehow above or fundamentally distinct or superior to the rest of creation. This conceit is incompatible with a Franciscan viewpoint.