

## A Franciscan Perspective on the Formation of Nature-Centered Leaders in Higher Education<sup>1</sup>

*Abstract: Imagine that one were to hold up a large mirror to our entire species. What would we see? It is reasonable for humanity to see itself as holding a special and privileged place among life on Earth. Franciscan colleges and universities are uniquely positioned to help humanity reconcile its relationship with the natural world; to illustrate this point, the paper considers three questions. Have we entered the Anthropocene? Does Nature-Centered Leadership align with Franciscan values? How can we engage with students in leadership for a sustainable future? In conclusion, two recommendations are offered. First, Franciscan colleges and universities should continue doing what we do very well: offer educational experiences that engage students in a cycle of action, in the form of teaching and service, with scholarship and active reflection informed by reason and faith. Second, Franciscan institutions should aspire to enhance our participation in the "integral ecology" movement, and if all goes well, perhaps that will result in an "ecological conversion" for our species.*

### Introduction

Imagine that one were to hold up a large mirror to our entire species. What would we see? It is reasonable for humanity to see itself as holding a "special" and "privileged" place among life on Earth. There is little doubt that we have special abilities that set us apart from other species. We have a keen ability to innovate and transcend our niche by mitigating the normal checks and balances that control natural populations. We have increased the capacity of the Earth to support more of us by way of the Industrial Revolution and modern agriculture. Yet, if everyone on Earth maintained the same standard of living as those of us in developed countries, then it would take several Earths to support all of us. Returning briefly to the metaphor of a large mirror held up to our entire species and how we might react, the words of Pope Francis are a good indication.

---

1. This paper is an extension of a presentation at the AFCU Symposium at Siena College in partnership with Holy Name Province, June 20-22, 2023, [Symposium – Association of Franciscan Colleges and Universities \(franciscancollegesuniversities.org\)](https://www.franciscancollegesuniversities.org).

The continued acceleration of changes affecting humanity and the planet is coupled today with a more intensified pace of life and work which might be called "rapidification." Although change is part of the working of complex systems, the speed with which human activity has developed contrasts with the naturally slow pace of biological evolution. Moreover, the goals of this rapid and constant change are not necessarily geared to the common good or to integral and sustainable human development. Change is something desirable, yet it becomes a source of anxiety when it causes harm to the world and to the quality of life of much of humanity.<sup>2</sup>

Many of us recognize the consequences of "rapidification" and what appears to be a lack of collective action by humanity to avert harm—this is (and should be) a source of anxiety. In response, the concept of "sustainability" has emerged along with the environmental movement to include socioeconomic considerations for social justice. A collective geopolitical response is required, and to that end, the United Nations is working for "peace and dignity on a healthy planet."<sup>3</sup> Spiritual motivations are needed as well. Pope Francis is an important and powerful voice in this regard, reminding all faith traditions that "authentic faith not only gives strength to the human heart, but also transforms life, transfigures our goals and sheds light on our relationship to others and with creation as a whole."<sup>4</sup> Our many faith traditions help us to navigate our relationship with the natural world.

Franciscan colleges and universities are uniquely positioned to help humanity reconcile its relationship with the natural world. They are skilled at creating communities where the cultural and spiritual dimensions necessary for a sustainable future are nurtured. This paper begins with an

---

2. Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'* [Encyclical Letter on Care For Our Common Home], The Holy See, May 24, 2015, ¶18, <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/index.html>

3. *United Nations* accessed October 15, 2023, <https://www.un.org/en/>.

4. Pope Francis, *Laudate Deum* [Apostolic Exhortation To All People of Good Will on the Climate Crisis], The Holy See, October 04, 2023, ¶61, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/20231004-laudate-deum.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/20231004-laudate-deum.html)

introduction to various perspectives on how humans relate to the natural world and how nature-centered leaders seek common ground among those different perspectives. Three questions are considered. Have we entered the Anthropocene? Does Nature-Centered Leadership align with Franciscan values? How can we engage with students in leadership for a sustainable future? This paper posits that, first, we should continue doing what we do very well: offer educational experiences that engage students in a cycle of action, in the form of teaching and service, with scholarship and active reflection informed by reason and faith. Second, we can aspire to enhance our participation in the "integral ecology" movement, and if all goes well, perhaps that will be our "ecological conversion"<sup>5</sup> as a species.

### **Have We Entered the Anthropocene?**

Faith and reason should inform the answer to this question. In his most recent Apostolic Exhortation, *Laudate Deum*, Pope Francis stated that "it is no longer possible to doubt the human – 'anthropic' – origin of climate change."<sup>6</sup> The science supports this assertion. We may have entered a new period in geological history called the "Anthropocene," which is described as a time when humanity dominates the Earth with uncertain consequences.<sup>7</sup> To illustrate this possibility, it is first necessary to briefly introduce the concept of "geologic time" with an example of why it is an important consideration for our species. The *International Commission on Stratigraphy* has primary

---

5. Aloys Budi Purnomo, "The Importance of Ecological Conversion for the Care of the Earth and Human Health in the Encyclical *Laudato Si'*." *Dialogo* 8, no. 2 (2022): 132-39.

6. Pope Francis, *Laudate Deum*, ¶11.

7. Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer, "The Anthropocene." (International Geosphere–Biosphere Programme, *IGBP Newsletter* 41, 2000), 17-18.

responsibility for considering all available scientific evidence to maintain the geologic timetable.<sup>8</sup> Scientists measure geologic history in vast periods of time with a naming convention that includes terms such as eras, periods, and epochs. For example, abundant scientific evidence indicates that dinosaurs emerged about 250 million years ago at the beginning of the Mesozoic Era and lived through the Jurassic Period until their demise. The evidence for the cause of their demise is less certain. Perhaps it was excessive volcanic activity as Pangea, the first great continent, began to split up and drift apart. Perhaps it was the result of a massive meteorite striking Earth. Both events could have clouded the atmosphere with subsequent cooling of the Earth, making it inhospitable for dinosaurs. Nevertheless, it appears that climate change contributed to the demise of dinosaurs; they were not the cause of their demise. We humans are in a different situation; evidence suggests that we are the primary cause of the changes in climate that impact life on Earth. Our innate intelligence, coupled with an ever-expanding ability to develop technologies and complex social systems, has enabled us to transcend the natural constraints that limit other species (perhaps this will change). We may have, as Stroemer and Crutzen suggested, entered the Anthropocene Epoch. A great deal of evidence exists to support the idea that humans are dominating and altering the biosphere with uncertain consequences for life on Earth, but it remains to be seen if the *International Commission on Stratigraphy* will officially add this new epoch to the geologic timetable. As far as we know, natural forces created conditions for the demise of dinosaurs. If there is another mass extinction on Earth because of climate change, we must consider the possibility that our species will be the catalyst. A simplified overview of the carbon cycle is all we need to demonstrate this point.

---

8. *International Commission on Stratigraphy*, accessed October 15, 2023, <https://stratigraphy.org/>.

Solar energy drives photosynthesis in plants. Carbon dioxide and water are the raw materials for this process. The sun provides the necessary energy for plants to split water while oxygenating the atmosphere and providing hydrogen for combination with carbon dioxide; energy-rich carbohydrates are the result (packets of "stored solar energy"). Living cells can then recapture the stored "solar energy" by consuming and breaking apart carbohydrates in the presence of oxygen to ultimately yield carbon dioxide and water. This process fuels biological activities in living systems and is part of the natural cycle of carbon on Earth. The biosphere is a co-evolving system of living organisms and geochemical cycles powered by the sun (i.e., photosynthesis captures the sun's energy and respiration releases it to fuel the system). We humans learned early in our history that we could burn wood (a compilation of carbohydrates) for heat energy; first to cook and to stay warm, and then to power simple steam machines. Burning wood is a process within the modern-day cycle of carbon in our atmosphere, but today, we also burn very large amounts of fossil fuel (stored solar energy from the past) to power transportation and build material societies. Burning fossil fuel for energy releases carbon from ancient times that then overloads the modern-day cycle of carbon in our atmosphere. The accumulation of carbon dioxide contributes to the development of a thermal blanket that surrounds the Earth and acts like a glass roof on a greenhouse and traps heat. Global deforestation to support human development exacerbates the problem because fewer plants are now available to capture excess carbon dioxide. This description is an oversimplification and leaves out additional greenhouse gases and a plethora of environmental issues such as the loss of biodiversity. While the burning of fossil fuels helped us to build and fuel complex socioeconomic systems, the horrific social and environmental consequences were unforeseen.

The situation has become much more than an environmental science concern. A socioeconomic transformation is necessary. Climate change can be described as a "super wicked problem" because we cannot fully comprehend its scope, we are part of the cause, we irrationally

discount its urgency, and the central authority necessary for global cooperation is limited.<sup>9</sup> This commentary is not to discount the importance of efforts by the United Nations; it is the global leader in Humanity's efforts to mitigate social and environmental issues. The *UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* is a comprehensive plan to transform the world, it includes seventeen goals with measurable outcomes to facilitate action in five areas of critical importance for humanity and the planet: "People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace, and Partnership."<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, work remains. The United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP) reported in *its Emissions Gap Report 2022* that if humanity is to avert global catastrophe, there needs to be a rapid transformation of societies to reduce greenhouse gases.<sup>11</sup> That transformation requires us to re-examine our relationship with the natural world and each other. In *Laudate Deum*, Pope Francis reminds us that it has been eight years since he published *Laudato Si'* and he has come to realize that "our responses have not been adequate" and "the world in which we live is collapsing and may be nearing a breaking point."<sup>12</sup> This has become "a global social issue and one intimately related to the dignity of human life."<sup>13</sup> Pope Francis has emerged as an influential leader in humanity's efforts to restore its relationship with the natural and spiritual worlds.

---

9. Kelly Levin, Benjamin Cashore, Steven Bernstein, and Graeme Auld, "Overcoming the Tragedy of Super Wicked Problems: Constraining Our Future Selves to Ameliorate Global Climate Change." *Policy Sciences* 45, no. 2 (2012): 127-28.

10. *Transforming our world: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, accessed October 30, 2023, <https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>.

11. UNEP, *Emissions Gap Report 2022: The Closing Window*. (United Nations Environmental Programme, October 27, 2022), <https://www.unep.org/resources/emissions-gap-report-2022>.

12. Pope Francis, *Laudate Deum*, ¶2.

13. Pope Francis, ¶3.

## Does Nature-Centered Leadership align with Franciscan values?

Nature-Centered Leadership is a practical perspective on leadership that challenges us to view the environment as a stakeholder in our human affairs and to make decisions that promote a sustainable future.<sup>14</sup> This is not as easy as it appears. The environmental impact varies greatly across cultures. The *Global Footprint Network* is an international nonprofit organization that analyzes ecological and social data across cultures to calculate the planet's capacity to support us.<sup>15</sup> For example, if everyone lived as I do, it would take 3.6 planets to support everyone. Nearly all of us in developed countries are using more than our share of the planet's resources (i.e., modern ecosystem services and energy from the past as fossil fuels). This injustice is an important consideration for nature-centered leaders. Perspectives vary as to how humans should relate to nature, and these differences cause us to use natural resources differently. Thus, injustices emerge with socioeconomic differences. Nature-centered leaders give voice to these differences in dialogue to find common ground for a shared vision, an "aspirational narrative" of a sustainable future for everyone.<sup>16</sup> To that end, some of us seek to understand the natural world in material terms (the process of science and technology) so that we can better understand how to sustain the environment for future generations (nature with a small "n" for discussion here). Others among us, are at one with the natural world, they understand nature through lived experiences (Nature with a capital "N"). Still others among us see the natural world as God's work (nature as Creation with a capital

---

14. Spencer S. Stober, "Nature-Centered Leadership: Nature as a Stakeholder in Strategic Planning." *International Journal of Environmental, Cultural, Economic and Social Sustainability* 9, no. 1 (2013): 109-17.

15. *Ecological Footprint Network: Advancing the Science of Sustainability*, accessed October 22, 2023, <https://www.footprintnetwork.org/about-us/>.

16. Spencer S. Stober, Tracy L Brown, and Sean J. Cullen, *Nature-Centered Leadership: An Aspirational Narrative*. (Champaign, Illinois: Common Ground Publishing, 2013): 26, 83-95.

"C"). The many faith traditions that hold this perspective are beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, for Catholics and those of us who are not Catholic, Pope Francis is an expert in this regard. The sections that follow explore each of these perspectives separately, albeit they are not mutually exclusive.

*Nature with a small "n"*

Many of us perceive the natural world as an ecosystem (a synergistic system of interdependent living and non-living components) and we rely on scientific explanations to understand nature. While this approach insists on material explanations and empirical evidence, its range of application is for the most part limited to natural and social world considerations. Scientific explanations help us to understand how things are, but they are less effective when dealing with ethical considerations, particularly when considering the environment as worthy of our consideration. One such attempt is planning for the "triple bottom line" (TBL)—people, planet, and profit—as first described by John Elkington in 1994.<sup>17</sup> Elkington coined the phrase "triple bottom line" to encourage decision-makers within organizations to adopt policies and accounting practices that consider "people, planet, and profit." Today, he is calling for us to re-think the concept because it has not gone far enough; in his words, "we need a new wave of TBL innovation and deployment" for a sustainable future.<sup>18</sup> Treating the environment as a stakeholder is no easy task because the idea of planet Earth as a stakeholder "lacks conceptual clarity and prescriptive power."<sup>19</sup> We can use scientific methods to assess the health of the planet and to then propose mitigation (e.g., limiting

---

17. John Elkington, "25 Years Ago I Coined the Phrase 'Triple Bottom Line.' Here's Why It's Time to Rethink It." *Harvard Business Review Digital Articles* (2018): 2-5.

18. Elkington, 5.

19. Kevin Gibson, "Stakeholders and Sustainability: An Evolving Theory." *Journal of Business Ethics* 109, no. 1 (08/01/2012): 5.

carbon emissions), but treating the environment as a stakeholder to whom we are committed is challenging. R. Edward Freeman's classic work, *Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach*, set in motion the idea that leaders have a responsibility to organizational stakeholders such as employees, customers, suppliers, lenders, and even society.<sup>20</sup> TBL thinking extends our responsibility to environmental considerations. There is no mandate to consider the environment as a stakeholder in human affairs, but as nature-centered leaders we can advocate for the environment in all aspects of our lives. Steps can be taken to adopt best environmental practices, to seek energy and matter efficiencies as individuals and organizations.

*Nature as Creation with a capital "C"*

Many of us perceive the natural world as God's creation and for that reason strive to be good stewards of the environment, and care for Creation. This is the case for many faith traditions, but our focus here is on the teachings of Saint Francis, and more recently, Pope Francis—they are powerful voices for a sustainable future. To illustrate this point, consider the following excerpts from *Laudato Si'* where Pope Francis begins with the words of Saint Francis of Assisi in *Canticle of the Creatures*.

“LAUDATO SI’, mi’ Signore” – “Praise be to you, my Lord.” In the words of this beautiful canticle, Saint Francis of Assisi reminds us that our common home is like a sister with whom we share our life and a beautiful mother who opens her arms to embrace us. “Praise be to you, my Lord, through our Sister, Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us, and who produces various fruit with coloured flowers and herbs.”<sup>21</sup>

---

20. R. Edward Freeman, *Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach*. Pitman Series in Business and Public Policy (Boston: Pitman, 1984), 31-32.

21. Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, ¶1.

The phrase "Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us" is supported by science. Humans depend on the Earth's ecosystems, fueled by the energy of the sun, to sustain life as we know it. Pope Francis calls on us to recognize the harm that we have inflicted on those ecosystems.

This sister now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her. We have come to see ourselves as her lords and masters, entitled to plunder her at will.<sup>22</sup>

He is calling for dialogue and solidarity to address the environmental crisis that we are facing.

I urgently appeal, then, for a new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet. We need a conversation which includes everyone, since the environmental challenge we are undergoing, and its human roots, concern and affect us all. The worldwide ecological movement has already made considerable progress and led to the establishment of numerous organizations committed to raising awareness of these challenges. Regrettably, many efforts to seek concrete solutions to the environmental crisis have proved ineffective, not only because of powerful opposition but also because of a more general lack of interest. Obstructionist attitudes, even on the part of believers, can range from denial of the problem to indifference, nonchalant resignation or blind confidence in technical solutions. We require a new and universal solidarity.<sup>23</sup>

Climate change is a clear and present danger for humanity. It remains to be seen whether that danger will become a catalyst for universal solidarity. The section that follows discusses what is perhaps our first perspective of the natural world, during a time when as a species, we were at one with the natural world.

#### *Nature with a Capital "N"*

It may be difficult for those of us reading this paper to imagine how we could survive in a jungle without access to modern tools and methods, yet there are indigenous populations throughout the world who live this life with ease. Perhaps they are at one with the natural world with access to life skills that we have long forgotten. They are of nature and have come to

---

22. Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, ¶2.

23. Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, ¶14

understand nature through lived experiences, with the environment preserved in their culture over time, and to this day. That said, a purely cultural explanation overlooks the possibility that we all have some innate (genetic) capacity to interact with nature in ways unexpressed in our everyday lives (i.e., a discussion that is beyond the scope of this paper). The indigenous populations in Ecuador are a prime example. In the United States, indigenous persons are less than two percent of the total population, but in Ecuador, indigenous persons exceed fifty percent of the total population. In 2008, Ecuador adopted a new constitution that recognized Nature or *Pachamama* (Mother Earth) as having constitutional rights. Constitutions are typically by people for people and therefore include language that promotes a clean environment for people, not nature itself. Ecuador is a land of diverse ecosystems and cultures. In 1998 when the *Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador* gained the right to vote, Nature gained her voice in Ecuador.<sup>24</sup> The following Spanish-to-English translation of Article 71 in Ecuador's 2008 Constitution is by Jessica Umbenhauer and was published in a paper entitled "Mother Nature's Utopia."<sup>25</sup> As you read Article 71, imagine that you were an attorney representing *Pachamama* to the highest court in the land. Your task is to find language in the constitution that overcomes the concern that *Pachamama* has as a stakeholder in human affairs "lacks conceptual clarity."<sup>26</sup>

Article 71, Nature or *Pachamama* (Mother Earth), where life is reproduced and fulfilled (carried out), has the right to total (complete) respect of its [Her] existence and the maintenance and regeneration of its [Her] vital cycles, structures, functions and evolutionary processes. Every person, community, town (village) or nationality will be able to demand to the public authority the compliance of the rights of Nature. To apply or interpret these rights, the established principles of the Constitution will be observed, in what is proper

---

24. Spencer S. Stober, "Ecuador: Mother Nature's Utopia." *The International Journal of Environmental, Cultural, Economic and Social Sustainability* 6, no. 2 (2010): 229-39.

25. Stober, 235.

26. Gibson, "Stakeholders and Sustainability," 25.

(fitting). The state will encourage natural (native) and legal persons and the collective group to protect Nature and promote the respect of all the elements that form an ecosystem.<sup>27</sup>

The phrase "all the elements that form an ecosystem" allows those representing *Pachamama* to submit material facts (scientific evidence) of harm to the environment as an ecosystem. The significance of this action by the Ecuadorians cannot be overstated, but the efficacy of the approach remains to be seen. Nevertheless, all voices are important considerations in the dialogue for a sustainable future.

### *Consilience*

Consilience may be achieved when we reach across disciplines to better understand complex phenomena. Edward O. Wilson's book, *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge*, did just that when considering science and religion.<sup>28</sup> Wilson was a renowned evolutionary biologist who championed the value of biodiversity to sustain the health of ecosystems; variability is an essential element for resilience in the cycle of life on Earth. There is ample evidence that both science and religion can inform our efforts to sustain the environment for future generations; both rely on faith and reason to discern differences. That said, it is more challenging to add a Nature (with a capital "N") to the mix for this discussion. Perhaps it is a challenge because many of us see the environment as something to be understood in material terms, and or, something to be cared for as God's Creation, and it is difficult to imagine the environment in any other form. Yet the difference between Nature and Creation may not be as great as it appears. Albert C. Outler was a renowned scholar who extensively studied a lifetime of sermons by John Wesley, founder of the Methodist Church. Outler described what he referred to as the "Wesleyan Quadrilateral" having four elements—scripture,

---

27. Stober, "Ecuador," 235.

28. Edward O. Wilson, *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge*. (New York: Random House, 1998), 8.

tradition, reason, and experience—that characterized Wesley's work informing theology and practice in the Methodist tradition.<sup>29</sup> Is it possible that these elements also inform our understanding of the natural world? The answer to this question is beyond the scope of this paper, but for the sake of discussion, consider the following speculation. Perhaps the four sources of theological understanding observed by Outler in Wesley's sermons (scripture, tradition, reason, and experience) can be extended to how we gain understanding of the environment. Recall a being at one with Nature view (i.e., nature with a capital "N"). Perhaps indigenous culture (tradition) relies on natural intelligence (reason) developed over time via interactions with the environment (experience) where the ways of Nature are revealed and preserved in oral traditions (scripture). Recall the environmental science view (i.e., nature with a small "n"). Perhaps scientific culture (tradition) relies on logic and methods (reason) developed over time via observations (experience) where the form and function of the natural world is revealed and preserved as paradigm (scripture). Consilience as illustrated here, albeit speculation, should not devalue the integrity of each perspective, but it does cause one to wonder how these perspectives could have emerged.

Carl G. Jung's influential research as a psychoanalyst is a classic example of how reaching across disciplines can help us achieve a better understanding of phenomena. One of his many works is particularly relevant here, the book entitled *Psychology and Religion*.<sup>30</sup> His analytic approach was similar to that of the natural sciences in that he relied on observation and avoided the application of metaphysical explanations. Jung reasoned that "reflection" is essential for an experience to be assimilated into an individual's "psychic" and that it was inadequate to limit consideration of the

---

29. Albert Cook Outler, "The Wesleyan Quadrilateral in John Wesley." *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 20, no. 1 (1985 1985): 7-18.

30. Carl G. Jung, *Psychology and Religion. The Terry Lectures*. (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1938).

"human psychic" to individuals.<sup>31</sup> According to Jung, "the true history of the mind is not preserved in learned volumes but in the living mental organism of everyone."<sup>32</sup> He challenged us to imagine the birth of our species, when we as a group first became aware, fading in and out of consciousness over time. Nature was a dangerous place for our primitive ancestors because we were creatures with more brains than brawn when compared to many other species, and it would have been a serious disadvantage for us to remain unconscious in the wilds of nature. Natural selection favored reasoning, self-recognition, group identification, and special abilities that have ultimately set us apart from other species. Jung was speaking of a time when our dreams were the "voice of the unknown."<sup>33</sup> When individuals acted on their dreams, the consequences were unpredictable and sometimes even dangerous to the individual or the group. The source of these actions, the "unknown influences" on individuals, was not understood by our primitive ancestors, and thus societies developed creeds and ceremonies as a defense against these dangerous tendencies.<sup>34</sup> These creeds and ceremonies multiplied over time to form institutions of all types, including science and religion, to mediate the "unknown influences" and now serve as a source of protection.<sup>35</sup> Instead of focusing on the negative aspects of these so-called influences, perhaps we should focus on the possibility that humans share a capacity to understand each other, and our sister and brother species, in ways that are not fully understood.

---

31. Jung, 1-3, 16.

32. Jung, 41, 46.

33. Jung, 21.

34. Jung, 22.

35. Jung, 21-23.

Science affords us powerful tools to demonstrate the material form and function of the environment (nature). Our many faith traditions and indigenous voices offer additional ways to understand the environment as being more than the form and function of matter, as being both spiritual and natural worlds (Creation and Nature). One could speculate that these different perspectives emerged among our species with time. Recall the opening sentences of this paper: "Imagine that one were to hold up a large mirror to our entire species. What would we see?" I see humans as one species among many, but having enhanced abilities that enable us to transcend our environment, at least for now. The fact that we are considering the Anthropocene to be a new period in geologic time is evidence that we recognize our environmental impact. We passed the so-called "mirror test" and must now take steps to mitigate unforeseen consequences. It should be all-hands-on-deck for consilience; colleges and universities can be very effective in this regard.

### **How Can We Engage with Students in Leadership for a Sustainable Future?**

The short answer is that Franciscan colleges and universities should continue doing what they do very well: provide students with a quality educational experience in the context of Franciscan values, while at the same time exploring new ways to reconcile Humanity's relationship with the environment. Franciscan colleges and universities are skilled at the creation of communities where the cultural and spiritual dimensions necessary for a sustainable future are nurtured. They are "walking the talk" in the development of Franciscan values and norms to improve the human condition. They engage students in a cycle of action, most often in the form of teaching and service, with scholarship and reflection informed by reason and faith-based norms and values. This section begins by showing how Franciscan schools describe their values-based educational experiences, their missions, and themes, and concludes with spiritual motivations for a sustainable future.

*Missions and Themes*

If students experience an educational environment where they "thoughtfully contemplate the purposes and consequences of their community engagement, then educators have set the stage for active reflection that may lead to 'reflexive' action."<sup>36</sup> Reflexive action is "a passionate reaction that emerges as students begin to identify strongly with the community in which they are engaged," and act accordingly.<sup>37</sup> To this end, Franciscan colleges and universities report quality educational experiences in the context of Franciscan values.

The Association of Franciscan Colleges and Universities (AFCU) is comprised of twenty-two Franciscan academic institutions in the United States. The AFCU supports member institutions in their respective missions, and it facilitates dialogue and collaboration. The AFCU supports Catholic higher education as "characterized by the Franciscan values of love/respect for one another and for all of creation, recognition that God is the Father of all persons, commitment to the search for truth, and for service with those in need."<sup>38</sup> I observed first-hand the expression of AFCU's mission while attending the 2023 AFCU symposium hosted by Siena College where we considered "Lighting the Way: Franciscan Education."<sup>39</sup> The conference restored my faith as a scientist in our ability to tackle climate change. Plenary speaker, Michael A. Perry, O.F.M., called for the formation of an institute of "integral ecology." This approach to ecology could expand upon our scientific

---

36. Alicia H. Sprow and Spencer S. Stober, "Universities and Community Engagement for a Sustainable Community." *The International Journal of Sustainability Education* 8, no. 1 (2012): 94.

37. Sprow and Stober, 94.

38. *AFCU Mission Statement*, accessed October 30, 2023, <https://franciscancollegesuniversities.org/about/>.

39. AFCU 2023 Symposium, accessed October 30, 2023, <https://franciscancollegesuniversities.org/symposium/>.

understanding of ecosystems to include Franciscan values for an integrated approach to the socioeconomic and cultural elements playing a role in climate change. As discussed previously, science provides powerful tools to demonstrate the material form and function of the natural world, while our many faith traditions and indigenous voices offer ways to understand and experience both the natural and spiritual worlds. All voices are relevant. Franciscan colleges and universities are incubators for the development of values that may enrich the integrated approach. Research supports this assertion.

Research by Mathew T. Goodwin observed six themes to be important considerations when stewarding the Franciscan heritage on campuses.<sup>40</sup> His words below illustrate some ways that we operationalize our communities.

Showing the heritage through *love*, *symbol*, and *service* demonstrates an active spirituality, engaging students through hard work and activity, compelling visuals, and signs of compassion. The showing of the Franciscan tradition is one whose beauty lies in its accessibility and inclusivity. Practitioners are also called to model Franciscan heritage through acts of telling. Acts of *fraternitas*, *story*, and *sacrifice* demonstrate for students and the broader community the explicit connection between the work of student affairs and the commitment to the work of Franciscan spirituality. By balancing both the ways of showing and telling students about the beauty of the Franciscan tradition, practitioners can continue to create the type of welcoming community espoused by the institutional values inspired by the Franciscan tradition.<sup>41</sup>

This example should not exclude the many additional ways we build Franciscan academic communities. That said, Goodwin's observations are accurate considering what we know about organizations. The development of norms and values in an organization requires symbolic and

---

40. Matthew T. Goodwin, "Being Franciscan: Recommended Practice for Student Affairs Professionals at Franciscan Colleges and Universities." *Dissertation Abstracts International Section A: Humanities and Social Sciences*. ProQuest Number 101125532, 2017, 68.

41. Goodwin, 99-100.

relational systems within the context of activities that are codified in artifacts.<sup>42</sup> The *Franciscan Field Guide: People, Places, Practices, and Prayers*, by Sister Rosemary Stets, O.S.F., provides a rich description of the Franciscan tradition.<sup>43</sup> As educators, we are in the position to steward the Franciscan tradition, including its norms and values, with students as they learn and reflect on their actions. Service-learning is one of many examples where students should be encouraged to reflect on their experiences. If the process is iterative within the context of Franciscan values, then we can anticipate students asking difficult questions, such as how we can mitigate the root causes of social and environmental issues. The difficult questions and subsequent actions become artifacts that we can use to assess our impact as Franciscan institutions.

Franciscan institutions report being action-oriented and willing to challenge students to explore difficult questions. Two examples should suffice. The first example includes two excerpts from the "About Siena College" page where prospective students see what is expected of them if they want to become a Siena "Saint."

At Siena, education isn't something you get, it's something you get to do.

Saints [Siena Students] are challenged ethically and morally to go beyond asking what and how to better understand why. They push outside their comfort zone to explore different perspectives and new possibilities...<sup>44</sup>

The phrase, "they push outside their comfort zone," is significant because it implies that students push themselves; they are not pushed. The reflective process should not be one of indoctrination,

---

42. W. Richard Scott, *Institutions and Organizations: Ideas, Interests, and Identities*. 4th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2008), 95-102.

43. Rosemary Stets, *Franciscan Field Guide: People, Places, Practices, and Prayers*. Cincinnati: Franciscan Media, 2022.

44. *About Siena College*, accessed October 30, 2023, [About | Siena College](#).

but instead, it should be an iterative process in the context of Franciscan values. A second example is the mission statement for Alvernia University.

Guided by Franciscan values and the ideal of "knowledge joined with love," and rooted in the Catholic and liberal arts traditions, Alvernia is a rigorous, caring, and inclusive learning community committed to academic excellence and to being and fostering broadly educated, life-long learners; reflective professionals and engaged citizens; and ethical leaders with moral courage.<sup>45</sup>

The phrase "ethical leaders with moral courage" is important because it causes us to reflect on how far we are willing to go when addressing root causes. Perhaps this may occur when students have "pushed themselves" into action upon witnessing an injustice that they cannot ignore. Colleges and universities must be prepared to navigate challenges that may emerge as some students recognize their traditional service as not going far enough to challenge systemic injustice.

#### *Spiritual Motivations for a Sustainable Future*

Franciscan institutions are in a strong position to rekindle our relationship with both the spiritual and natural worlds. As discussed earlier, we may have entered a new period in geologic history, the Anthropocene, and there is a need for dialogue among divergent views as to how humans should relate to the environment. We are a powerful species with the ability to transcend its niche, and our actions are rendering many species powerless and unable to adapt to a rapidly changing climate. Pope Francis is calling for humanity to rethink "the question of human power, its meaning and its limits."<sup>46</sup> Nature-centered leaders take steps in organizations to challenge assumptions regarding our relationship with nature, to acknowledge that we are of nature and that a

---

45. *Alvernia University Mission Statement*, accessed October 30, 2023, <https://www.alvernia.edu/about/franciscan-tradition/mission>.

46. Pope Francis, *Laudate Deum*, ¶28.

rightful relationship with nature is not power over, but power with nature.<sup>47</sup> In *Laudate Deum*, Pope Francis calls for dialogue concerning spiritual motivation among faith traditions.

I cannot fail in this regard to remind the Catholic faithful of the motivations born of their faith. I encourage my brothers and sisters of other religions to do the same, since we know that authentic faith not only gives strength to the human heart, but also transforms life, transfigures our goals and sheds light on our relationship to others and with creation as a whole.<sup>48</sup>

In addition to dialogue across faith traditions, colleges and universities are equipped to inform the conversation with a scientific understanding of ecosystems along with socioeconomic considerations. Diverse cultural traditions and philosophies must be included in that dialogue. One such example is the "Deep Ecology" movement.

Deep Ecology is an environmental movement that was championed by Arne Naess and continues to this day; the movement is informed by an experiential process of humans living at one with nature.<sup>49</sup> Naess describes it as an eco-philosophical perspective that he called "Ecosophy."

Ecology is a limited science which makes use of scientific methods. Philosophy is the most general forum of debate on fundamentals, descriptive as well as prescriptive, and political philosophy is one of its subsections. By an "ecosophy" I mean a philosophy of ecological harmony or equilibrium.<sup>50</sup>

---

47. Spencer S. Stober, "Nature-Centered Leadership: Challenging the "Rules of the Game." *International Journal of Environmental, Cultural, Economic, and Social Sustainability* 15, no. 1 (2019): 1-13.

48. Pope Francis, *Laudate Deum*, ¶61.

49. Arne Naess, with Alan Drengson and Bill Devall as editors, *Ecology of Wisdom: Writings by Arne Naess*. Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint Distributed by Publishers Group West, 2008.

50. Arne Naess, "The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement: A Summary." *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy* 16 (03/01/1973): 99.

Deep Ecology is more than a science, and as Naess stated above, it is “a philosophy of ecological harmony or equilibrium” with nature. It is reasonable to assume that if humans are to live in harmony with nature, then natural and spiritual dimensions of our lives are relevant considerations. The recognition of Pachamama’s rights by Ecuadorians is an example that we have already discussed. A second example is in *The Canticle of the Creatures* where Saint Francis of Assisi states the following: "Praise be to you, my Lord, by our Sister Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us, and who produces varied fruit with colored flowers and herbs."<sup>51</sup> The phrase "sustains and governs us" acknowledges, in modern terms, our place in the natural world where we are both sustained and constrained by human limitations within the global ecosystem. A third example took place in Gubio where Saint Francis forged a "covenant" between the citizens and a wolf whom they saw as terrorizing their town.<sup>52</sup> Perhaps Saint Francis was a "Deep Ecologist" long before the concept emerged among environmentalists.<sup>53</sup> "He [Saint Francis] placed value on nature and his spiritual experiences in it."<sup>54</sup>

It is necessary to acknowledge a tension that may emerge for some of us when we conflate scientific and spiritual perspectives regarding our relationship with nature and the origin(s) of life as we know it. The intent here is not to conflate the disciplines. Instead, both science and religion, each relying on their respective ways of knowing, may become powerful partners in our efforts to understand humanity's place in the biosphere. Darwin's theory of evolution was controversial

---

51. Keith Warner, O.F.M, “Was St. Francis a Deep Ecologist?” in *Embracing Earth: Catholic Approaches to Ecology*, eds. Alvert J. LaChance and John E. Carroll (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 239.

52. Warner, 238.

53. Ilia Delio, Keith Warner, and Pamela Wood, *Care for Creation: A Franciscan Spirituality of the Earth*. Cincinnati, OH: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2007, 38, 53.

54. Warner, “Was St. Francis a Deep Ecologist?” 226.

because it raised the possibility that life on Earth could have emerged without God and that humans were not created in the image of God. Ilia Delio, in *The Emergent Christ*, posits that there may be a God in evolution. In her words:

Change is integral to God because God is love and love is a dynamic relatedness. God is eternally becoming ever newness in love, and God's ever newness in love is the inner source of evolution toward newness and greater union in love.<sup>55</sup>

Elio Delio's words above, and those of E. O. Wilson to follow, are an appropriate closing to this section. In *The Creation: An Appeal to Save Life on Earth*, Wilson stated the following: "It will be necessary to find common ground on which the powerful forces of religion and science can be joined. The best place to start is the stewardship of life."<sup>56</sup> To that end, I offer the following conclusions and aspirations.

### **Conclusion with Aspirations**

This paper began by asking what we would see if one were to hold up a large mirror to our entire species. The case has been made that we have entered the Anthropocene, and many of us see ourselves as being part of a new period in geologic history when humans dominate the biosphere with uncertain consequences for life on Earth. Our destiny may depend on dialogue for consensus among divergent voices concerning humanity's impact on the biosphere and our sister and brother species. Those among us who understand the natural world in material terms may seek technical solutions to mitigate harm. Those among us who understand the environment through lived experiences may seek ways to live at one with Nature while acknowledging her value independent of

---

55. Ilia Delio, *The Emergent Christ: Exploring the Meaning of Catholic in an Evolutionary Universe*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2011, 153.

56. Edward O. Wilson, *The Creation: An Appeal to Save Life on Earth*. 1st ed. New York: Norton, 2006, 165.

human needs. Those among us who understand the environment as God's creation may seek ways to restore our spiritual relationship with Creation and to be good stewards of the environment. We are all leaders in some capacity, and with reflection on these divergent views, we may learn new ways to be nature-centered in our interactions with the environment—to see our sister and brother species as stakeholders in human affairs. Franciscan colleges and universities are uniquely positioned to help Humanity reconcile its relationship with the spiritual and natural worlds. They are inclusive of the many faith traditions, and they are skilled at the creation of communities where the cultural and spiritual dimensions necessary for a sustainable future are nurtured. What can we aspire to do?

*First, we can aspire to continue developing educational experiences that engage students in a cycle of action, in the form of teaching and service, with scholarship and active reflection informed by reason and faith.* Some of us may be called to action and challenge the status quo when confronted with environmental injustices, whether as harm to people and or the environment. Active reflection can lead to a passionate reaction when students begin to identify strongly with a community, and then act on those feelings<sup>57</sup> Consider this example. On March 29, 2023, the Republic of Vanuatu and 132 co-sponsoring countries received United Nations General Assembly support calling for an advisory opinion by the International Criminal Court of Justice for the right to sue countries believed to be responsible for climate change.<sup>58</sup> Reactions to this action will vary. A person living in a country, such as the United States, with high carbon emissions might feel unfairly judged, even when confronted with the fact that their socioeconomic activities are a major driver of the climate changes impacting archipelagos such as Vanuatu. That person may feel unfairly judged because in their view, human ingenuity will

---

57. Sprow and Stober, “Universities and Community Engagement,” 94.

58. *Vanuatu ICJ Initiative*, accessed November 5, 2023, <https://www.vanuatuicj.com/resolution>.

solve the problem as technologies and circular economies are developed to reduce emissions; in their mind, the settling of lawsuits could detract from resources for innovation. There are other perspectives that warrant discussion. In *Laudate Deum*, Pope Francis cautions us regarding this "growing technocratic paradigm" that feeds upon our hubris.

Artificial intelligence and the latest technological innovations start with the notion of a human being with no limits, whose abilities and possibilities can be infinitely expanded thanks to technology. In this way, the technocratic paradigm monstrously feeds upon itself.<sup>59</sup>

*Laudate Deum* is an inspirational call to action that enjoins many voices in dialogue as to how humanity can move forward as a global community for a sustainable future. Climate change has become a potential source of tension for everyone, but those who are most vulnerable, lacking power and resources, are often least able to adapt. Pope Francis suggests that "a change in lifestyle could bring healthy pressure to bear on those who wield political, economic and social power."<sup>60</sup> The United Nations has taken steps to establish a fund for restitution and technology transfer to impacted countries. Yet, the path forward is complicated by competing perspectives. We can expect protests, civil disobedience, legal actions, or even worse. Educators must be prepared to draw upon their tools of diplomacy to minimize harm and facilitate respectful dialogue if these situations emerge. Our students deserve an educational experience with a safe space for thoughtful deliberation and respectful dialogue. Franciscan colleges and universities are well-equipped for the task.

*Second, we can aspire to enhance our participation in the "integral ecology" movement.* Perhaps in the form of an institute for integral ecology as suggested by plenary speaker Michael A. Perry, O.F.M., at the 2023 AFCU symposium hosted by Siena College. Our participation in this movement could

---

59. Pope Francis, *Laudate Deum*, ¶21.

60. Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, ¶206.

build upon the scientific understanding of ecosystems to include Franciscan values for an integrated approach to consider socioeconomic and cultural elements playing a role in climate change.

Franciscan institutions are skilled at service-learning and offer the full range of academic disciplines to meet this interdisciplinary challenge. Their inclusivity makes room for respectful dialogue among diverse faiths and indigenous traditions in an effort to seek common ground for a sustainable future. It remains to be seen what the future will be.

If all goes well, there will be a time when our species reconciles its relationship with our sister and brother species. A time when our clever nature and hubris no longer blind us to the possibility that natural systems may be more resilient than our social systems. A time when we recognize ourselves as being of nature in the context of spiritual awareness—perhaps that will be our "ecological conversion"<sup>61</sup> as a species.

---

61. Purnomo, "The Importance of Ecological Conversion," 132-39.

## Bibliography

- Crutzen, Paul J. and Eugene F. Stoermer, "The Anthropocene." International Geosphere–Biosphere Programme, *IGBP Newsletter 41*, 17-18, 2000.
- Delio, Ilia. *The Emergent Christ: Exploring the Meaning of Catholic in an Evolutionary Universe*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2011.
- Delio, Ilia, Keith Warner, and Pamela Wood. *Care for Creation: A Franciscan Spirituality of the Earth*. Cincinnati, OH: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2007.
- Elkington, John. "25 Years Ago I Coined the Phrase 'Triple Bottom Line.' Here's Why It's Time to Rethink It." *Harvard Business Review Digital Articles*, 2-5, 2018.
- Freeman, R. Edward. *Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach*. Pitman Series in Business and Public Policy. Boston: Pitman, 1984.
- Gibson, Kevin. "Stakeholders and Sustainability: An Evolving Theory." *Journal of Business Ethics* 109, no. 1 (2012): 15-25.
- Goodwin, Matthew T. "Being Franciscan: Recommended Practice for Student Affairs Professionals at Franciscan Colleges and Universities." *Dissertation Abstracts International Section A: Humanities and Social Sciences*. ProQuest ID 101125532, 2017.
- Jung, Carl G. *Psychology and Religion. The Terry Lectures*. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1938.
- Levin, Kelly, Benjamin Cashore, Steven Bernstein, and Graeme Auld. "Overcoming the Tragedy of Super Wicked Problems: Constraining Our Future Selves to Ameliorate Global Climate Change." *Policy Sciences* 45, no. 2 (2012): 123-52.
- Næss, Arne, with Alan R. Drengson and Bill Devall as editors. *Ecology of Wisdom: Writings by Arne Naess*. Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint Distributed by Publishers Group West, 2008.
- Naess, Arne. "The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement: A Summary." *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy* 16 (03/01/1973): 95-100.
- Outler, Albert Cook. "The Wesleyan Quadrilateral in John Wesley." *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 20, no. 1 (1985): 7-18.
- Pope Francis. *Laudate Deum* [Apostolic Exhortation To All People of Good Will on the Climate Crisis], The Holy See, October 04, 2023, sec. 11, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/20231004-laudate-deum.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/20231004-laudate-deum.html)

- Pope Francis. *Laudato si'* [Encyclical Letter on Care For Our Common Home], The Holy See, May 24, 2015, sec. 18, <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/index.html>
- Purnomo, Aloys Budi. "The Importance of Ecological Conversion for the Care of the Earth and Human Health in the Encyclical *Laudato Si'*." *Dialogo* 8, no. 2 (2022): 132-39.
- Scott, W. Richard. *Institutions and Organizations: Ideas and Interests*, 4th ed. Thousand Oaks, California: Publications, 2008.
- Sprow, Alicia H., and Spencer S. Stober. "Universities and Community Engagement for a Sustainable Community." *The International Journal of Sustainability Education* 8, no. 1 (2012): 91-100.
- Stets, Rosemary. *Franciscan Field Guide: People, Places, Practices, and Prayers*. Cincinnati: Franciscan Media, 2022.
- Stober, Spencer S. "Nature-Centered Leadership: Challenging the "Rules of the Game." *International Journal of Environmental, Cultural, Economic, and Social Sustainability* 15, no. 1 (2019): 1-13.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Nature-Centered Leadership: Nature as a Stakeholder in Strategic Planning." *International Journal of Environmental, Cultural, Economic and Social Sustainability* 9, no. 1 (2013): 109-17.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Ecuador: Mother Nature's Utopia." *The International Journal of Environmental, Cultural, Economic and Social Sustainability* 6, no. 2 (2010): 229-39.
- Stober, Spencer S., Tracy L Brown, and Sean J. Cullen. *Nature-Centered Leadership: An Aspirational Narrative*. Champaign, Illinois: Common Ground Publishing LLC, 2013.
- UNEP. *Emissions Gap Report 2022: The Closing Window*. United Nations Environmental Programme, October 27, 2022, <https://www.unep.org/resources/emissions-gap-report-2022>
- Warner, Keith, O.F.M, "Was St. Francis a Deep Ecologist?" in *Embracing Earth: Catholic Approaches to Ecology*, eds. Albert J. LaChance and John E. Carroll (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 225-280.
- Wilson, Edward O. *The Creation: An Appeal to Save Life on Earth*. 1st ed. New York: Norton, 2006
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge*. New York: Random House, 1998.