

Introduction

During the past two years, the way of life we are accustomed to has been challenged by a world-wide epidemic. 3.3 million People have died; some of those whom we loved personally and all- our brothers and sisters through God's creation. God was faithful to us during this season, expanding the way we see things, teaching us in solitude and quiet, allowing our scientists to create vaccines. We did our best to be faithful to him; learning to use zoom, viewing podcasts from around the country, touching base with other homebound individuals, reading the Bible in a year, all in the comfort of our sweatpants.

Now he is calling us to be faithful in a work He has chosen for us and those who surround us in fraternity. He is calling us to serve the things He loves: His people created in his image and likeness and to serve His creation – the world he created for us to be caretakers of. Article 8 of our Franciscan constitution speaks to us of deepening the values and choices of our evangelical life according to our Rule. This requires us to be open to challenges that come from the society in which we live. I will be talking about the challenge of serving creation and Kim will share with us about caring for one another.

When Beth first asked me to speak I was surprised because I am not a teacher but I have always loved God's creation. My husband Steve and I navigated the ins and outs of raising seven children which made for a boisterous family of five boys and two girls. Everywhere we lived over the years my husband was able to create a park. We Always had trees, a garden with a trellis and benches; birds to feed and squirrels who consumed corn, grass as soft as carpet. The children had chores of weeding and picking raspberries, and a peaceful place to play.

A few weeks ago we heard the scripture from Luke chapter 9, the story of the transfiguration. Peter James and John went with Jesus up the mountain to pray. The Lord's appearance was glorified and He was speaking with two men. The apostles saw it was good that they were all together and wanted to erect three tents; One for Jesus, one for Elijah and one for Moses. God's intention was to reveal Jesus as the Son of God but the apostles did not understand the program. In the same way we don't always understand the program that God has for

us. When my daughter Melissa was 3, she was fishing with her siblings and caught a very large dogfish. The other kids, seeing her with a Large fish on her line, all cast their lines in the same direction hoping to catch a big fish also; their lines became hopelessly tangled. Sometimes, when we seek solutions to situations, our good intentions get tangled up. As individuals and fraternities we need to pray, reevaluate and perhaps start in new directions of service to the wider community.

As Franciscans, we are fairly good at serving those in our fraternity and even those in our parish. Some of us have a more difficult time looking at issues of power plants and clean water as a call from God. At times these issues appear to be political when in fact they are a part of our call gospel to life and life to gospel. The gospel, in Genesis 1:31 states "And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good". God calls us to be caretakers of all that He called good. In Genesis 2; 15 we are instructed to cultivate and care for creation.

My favorite verses are in Daniel 3: 57 where all the creatures and creation are called to praise the Lord. Among those verses we read: Stars of the heavens, bless the Lord, praise and exalt him above all forever. Every shower and dew, bless the Lord, praise and exalt him above all forever. All you winds, fire and heat cold and chill, all called to bless the Lord their creator. Cold and Chill have been enthusiastic in their praise this year.

We have a perfect example of loving creation in St. Francis. Beauty is rooted in God and flows from God. God's beauty is reflected in creation and we learn about God from the beauty of creation. In Mark 9 V 15 Jesus instructs the apostles to go into the whole world and proclaim the gospel to every creature. When I was in formation, the image of Francis sitting and instructing the animals to praise God did not resonate with me. It seemed sentimental to me and I wrestled with books illustrating the scene as kind of a hallmark moment. I needed some instruction on this. We taught our children to care for animals by having a wide variety of pets over the years. 3Dogs, 5cats,a rabbit, and a bird, who through lack of my instruction met his demise on the top of our refrigerator due to the heat from the vent. We had multiple hamsters who took

great delight in escaping through our furnace pipes. Eventually, my husband had to carve a door in the base of one of the pipes so we could retrieve the runaways. Our oldest son, Father Jon Vander Ploeg is the director of Spiritual Formation at St. Paul Seminary in St. Paul Minnesota. I have him on speed dial for my weekly questions of how things work in the Catholic spiritual world. One day I shared with Father Jon my confusion over the St Francis story. He told me that this was a gift we would have had in paradise; nature responding to humanity as the Lord originally intended. He called it empire over creatures. The holiness radiating from St. Francis caused the animal natures to respond as they would have before the fall of man. The story is more meaningful to me now. Because beauty is rooted in God and creation reflects His beauty, we can be continually drawn to him. His creatures are drawn also.

Our belief in God and our care for creation should go hand in hand. Pope Francis elevates this relationship by calling it one of our three fundamental relationships. Love of God, love of neighbor and love of creation. As a Catholic it is our tradition to respect the created world and all the life it includes. The pope states “If someone has not learned to stop and admire something beautiful, we should not be surprised if he or she treats everything as an object to be used and abused without scruple. If we want to bring about deep change, we need to realize that certain mindsets really do influence our behavior. Our efforts at education will be inadequate and ineffective unless we strive to promote a new way of thinking about human beings, life, society and our relationship with nature. Otherwise, the Paradigm of consumerism will continue to advance, with the help of the media and the highly effective workings of the market.”

Sr. Damien Marie, dean of science and sustainability at Aquinas College and a member of the Franciscan sisters of the Eucharist says “Being pro-environment and pro-life go hand in hand and should reinforce one another. “She states,” caring for the earth is for the common good-not just for the planet itself but for the people forced by poverty to live in the most contaminated areas. They suffer the most. “We see this in brothers and sisters forced to live by dumps, next to expressways that have destroyed their neighborhoods, those sharing their water from rivers polluted by chemical plants and using wells contaminated by PFAS.

The cry of the earth and the cry of the poor are intertwined. By responding to the cry of the earth we are not just serving the planet but God's people who live in contaminated areas throughout the planet.

My fraternity, Our Mother of Sorrows in Grand Rapids, has been discerning our call to creation through the Laudato Si platform. This platform was introduced by the Vatican on the fifth anniversary of the Pope's encyclical Laudato Si. It outlines seven categories of sustainability goals to care for creation and for each other. This process has allowed us to broaden our scope, both in seeing what needs to be done and in identifying appropriate action for ourselves as individuals and for our fraternity. We have prayed through a series of Saturday discernments and in response to Article 7 in our rule, repented for our shortfalls. Our fraternities may be called to projects and we as individuals can make a difference just by small changes in our life.

I want to share a little about these categories and how you might apply them in your fraternity or individually.

First we have the Cry of the Poor.

We can stand together in solidarity with those affected by failed systems, support programs that address immediate short term needs such as soup kitchens, pregnancy resources, clothing centers and food banks.

We can ensure that our community has access to green spaces that are cost free. On a day when going to the zoo costs \$ 15.00 a person, it is vital for families to be able to find God in green space.

Some might be called to assist indigenous people retain the rights to their lands and waters.

The next grouping is Adoption of sustainable lifestyles

A fraternity might eliminate use of disposable plastic and Styrofoam dishes at gatherings.

You might reduce your purchase of consumer goods or reduce your use of heat and air conditioning.

We can all install efficient lighting or you might consider transitioning to a more plant based diet.

Next on the chart you can see Community resilience and empowerment

As a fraternity you might organize meetings to discuss advocacy issues such as child protection, pregnancy help or immigrant and refugee work.

As an individual you might strengthen connections between church and social ecological issues. I have said that I would like to hear about some of these environmental issues from the pulpit. The Lord pointed out to me that I have the opportunity to bring these issues forward during our prayers for petition at daily Mass every day. I can take a small step personally in this area.

The next section is Ecological economics

As a fraternity you might research to find an ethical bank to deposit your dues into.

You might be called to ensure those who perform care labor are well supported.

As an individual you can purchase goods from local retailers. You can purchase from a business with ethical wages and commitment to sustainability.

We can all respond to Ecological Education

As a fraternity you can encourage members to complete a Laudato Si Plan or another planning tool.

Create opportunities for youth to take part in Laudato Si initiatives.

As an individual you can present to your fraternity information you have researched.

We had an amazing presentation by Marilyn Hawkins from our fraternity speaking on pollinators. Not only did she describe how to grow plants and care for our

yards in ways that encourage pollinators, we also discovered that one in three things that all people eat depend on pollinators. Bees, butterflies and moths, all pollinators, affect our food source and the sources of food throughout the world. The little things we protect have a far reaching impact on the rest of the world. We are all entwined in the tapestry of creation and need to work together to be good caretakers of all God's handiwork.

From a spiritual perspective Beauty has a natural healing ability. After a long day the beauty of nature helps us to heal, draws us out of ourselves towards our heavenly Father and helps us to pray.

As a fraternity you can make a Laudato Si Study and Prayer guide available to parishes and the public or develop a season of creation and celebrate it each year.

You could speak about the encyclical to your fraternity.

As an individual, pray outdoors or create a sacred space outdoors. Invite others to join you.

Finally we have Response to the cry of the earth which I prefer to think of as response to stewardship of God's creation. We are responding to God and His order, caring for his creation. Some ways we can cooperate with God's work are

As a fraternity we could plant a native garden or native trees.

As individuals we can protect those pollinators through our plantings and discerning use of insecticide.

We can inspire young people to love creation and the creator. This can be a family effort involving children and grandchildren. When our family was young we struggled to make ends meet and could not take elaborate vacations. We would camp in Ludington and later rented a cabin on a nearby lake. My husband loved hiking and we had many adventures on the trails, once crossing what seemed like a desert trail from the camping area to the lighthouse. Our hiking party included a baby, toddlers and preteens but no water. This was in the days before everyone had their own water bottle. We have pictures of rain-soaked teenagers with long faces dragging their feet over tree roots. You can almost hear them moaning that

they never wanted to hike again. By some miracle, as they became adults they all loved nature. They love raspberries even though they complained about picking them. They have bird sanctuaries in their yards, fruit trees that feed animals and flourishing gardens. We used to drive them on remote trails to see if we could spot deer. Now one of my daughters bores her children with photos of deer when she walks her favorite trail. and. . They all wanted their children to have the same experiences they did. We have delighted in watching them return to the same areas and take their children on hikes that are too long and too wet and boring evening car rides to see wildlife. The grandchildren wore expressions very similar to their parents' expressions in earlier years.

Just as we recognize we are each a unique part of the Body of Christ, so we each have a unique piece of this caretaking puzzle.

In the story of the Prodigal son, the father tells the son” You are here with me always; everything I have is yours” We have the grace and the gifts to do this work. We have people who can drive city projects, people who can write grants for clean water. Those who can teach us all how to protect pollinators and rid our land of invasive species. We have those among us who can teach us to live with less, buy local and live in a sustainable environment.

Change begins on the inside and works its way out. The Holy Spirit is rousing us from indifference on the inside and leading us to steps that will bring the world back to right order and new life.