



**Franciscans in the Maelstrom:
The Politics of Poverty, Peace and Care for Creation**

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“In every country and in every age, the priest has been hostile to liberty. He is always in alliance with the despot, abetting his abuses in return for protection to his own.”

These accusatory words were addressed by Thomas Jefferson in a letter to Horatio Spafford dated March 17, 1814. The elder inventor, author and businessman dared question Jefferson’s public attacks on religion in general, and his blistering critique of the bearers of the gospel – the New England priests - in particular. Jefferson accused the ‘priests’ of supporting the Crown, England, at the cost of freedom, of trying to impose one religious system on the United States of America and of willingly destroying all other religious claims to spiritual authority. This becomes particularly relevant in an age where a presidential candidate declares that “God wants me to be president.”

Heated exchanges between those committed to a spiritual regeneration of the nation and the world and those who believe that religion is antithetical to freedom and human progress have marked the history of political debates and played a significant role in all recent election campaigns. Evidence for this is found in questions regarding the religious identity of four recent or current presidential candidates. Little discussion was given to the specifically religious content of their message. Mormonism, Catholicism, Evangelicalism, and the erroneous accusation of being a Muslim all point in the general direction of the myth of American political identity – ‘one nation under God,’ a Christian nation according to many if not most of the electorate, with unswerving allegiance to the flag and the republic for which it stands.

Allegiance to current U.S. political choices has in recent times come under the moral microscope following a series of government actions that have jeopardized the balance of forces in regions witnessing high levels of social dislocation, undermined international conventions on the treatment of political and military prisoners, caused untold damage to the environment and shifted funding needed to attend to urgent social needs in the U.S. and abroad to the military. The international battle against ‘terrorism’ and the ‘axis of evil’ has come at a deep cost to the poor of this country and abroad because precious resources have been poured into a war that, according to many, is illegal, morally unjustifiable and incapable of being ‘won

What have the debates that raged at the dawn of the American democratic experiment, and those of the current presidential races, international engagement in wars, deepening poverty and environmental degradation have to do with the inauguration of the Franciscan Action Network, a historic and novel experiment that seeks to bring together the voice of the Franciscan family – a large, not always coherent grouping of women and men, young and old? Everything!

The Franciscan movement was born out of a context not all that dissimilar to what we witness today. Military might was defined by divine right; the lords of the manor and the czars of economic accumulation justified their blessed and noble state by reference to a providential and beneficent God. Meanwhile, the poor and those used for ‘fodder’ in the seemingly interminable internecine conflicts of Europe were passive spectators of a history controlled by the rich, the powerful, and by a religion that had lost sight of its core evangelical values and ultimate allegiance.

With the limitations of technological advance, the natural environment was under increasing threat as arable lands became overworked, indigenous forests increasingly cut down and urban centers expanded, exacting a toll on the local natural environment.

Francis of Assisi’s times were not dissimilar to our own in another respect, the international fight over religious and cultural ideologies, the battle for the Holy Land and surrounding territories, and the battle for God. In one sense, Francis witnessed what Samuel Huntington has termed the “clash of civilizations,” between what became the stereotypical story line of Christian ‘freedom bearers’ and ‘Muslim usurpers and charlatans’. Francis and his early followers witnessed the wholesale destruction of the values of human dignity and solidarity, under the banner of God and politics. It was this experience that led Francis to turn from violence, hatred and ignorance and to pursue dialogue with the perceived ‘enemy’. Francis’ confrontation with the Rulers of the World (see Letter to the Rulers of Peoples) was transformed into opportunities for transformation. He went to the centers of power, where power was abused, where the merchants of dehumanization hocked their wares. He met them on their terms and called them to a higher ground. Active non-violence became the hallmark of the Franciscan movement, although not all of those who have associated themselves with the movement have shared the same vision or commitment, or have placed their power at the service of humanity.

Three central themes are present within the Franciscan movement, themes that shape the nature of current national debate. These themes, which are intimately interwoven, are defined by **Poverty, Peace and Care for Creation**.

Poverty and the poor is a central theme in the life and movement of Francis of Assisi, something that is fundamentally absent from the current presidential debates, except as it relates to the weakening purchasing power of the middle class, and some aspects of healthcare reform. Francis came to the realization that the poor have been ‘created’ and are ‘maintained’ because of the unjust ordering and distribution of the ‘goods of the earth’. Poverty is not an accident of history; it is the direct result of decisions made by those who control the economic levers and access to political power. In the words of Paul Collier, *The Bottom Billion* (Oxford, University Press, 2007, xi), “change in societies at the very bottom must come predominantly from within; we cannot impose it on them. In all these societies

there are struggles between brave people wanting change and entrenched interests opposing it.”

Francis, much like Collier, realized that too many of us remain bystanders – but far from innocent. For this reason Francis, and the members of the Franciscan Action Network, bring our resources – human and material – to the struggle of the poor, marginalized and most neglected of our society and world. We do so from a particular vantage point: that of standing in the midst of the poor, walking and working closely with them, linking our dignity with theirs, our destiny with their destiny, and allowing them to shape the discourse and propose solutions for themselves that should guide all future policy decisions.

Francis recognized the link between the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of the few, the deepening impoverishment of the many and an increase in **conflict and social dislocation** (social non-cohesion). Neither Francis – nor I – want to demonize the ‘wealthy’ indiscriminately. They, too, are searching for a greater sense of their dignity and humanity. Rather, Francis recognized the cost of obtaining and maintaining wealth, oftentimes through illicit, illegal and immoral means. Francis also recognized the dangerous link between the questionable accumulation of capital, deepening impoverishment of the ‘masses’, and the outbreak of increasingly extreme forms of violence. This link has not gone unnoticed by development experts. Lael Brainard, in her recent work entitled *Too Poor for Peace* (p. 1), writes:

Extreme poverty exhausts governing institutions, depletes resources, weakens leaders, and crushes hope – fueling a volatile mix of desperation and instability. Poor, fragile states can explode into violence or implode into collapse, imperiling their citizens, regional neighbors, and the wider world as livelihoods are crushed, investors flee, and ungoverned territories become a spawning ground for global threats like terrorism, trafficking, environmental devastation, and disease.

Conflict mitigation and management is thus intimately linked to the struggle for economic justice in the Franciscan tradition and movement. **Economic Justice and the pursuit of Peace and non-violent social transformation** give fresh energy to the Franciscan Action Network seeking to propose an alternative vision to political leaders, military commanders and ordinary citizens in an age of fear, resignation and open hostility towards all who are ‘not us’ – immigrants fleeing political and economic hardships; Muslims who are committed to the same values as others who participate in the American ‘dream’; those among us who might question the pursuit of a military option in all international dealings.

Care for Creation is the third ‘pillar’ of the Franciscan movement. Francis himself is oftentimes depicted as a bird-bathing nature lover plopped down in gardens throughout the U.S. This ‘soft side’ of the visionary prophet of the 12th and 13th centuries masks a more fundamental truth about Francis’ vision of the fundamental connection between human beings and the natural environment in which they live. Environmental care is a matter of justice and the survival of all species, equally dignified before God. In Francis’ view of the world, nature inhabits us, it dwells within us and shapes our every thought, the choices we make and the actions we take. Nature stands in direct relationship to the human community, providing opportunities for the survival and the well-being of all human persons - *all human beings equally*. The absence of justice in relationships within the human community, for Francis, leads to extreme forms of degradation of the natural

environment. Viewed in contemporary developmental and security language, Francis and the Franciscan movement take seriously the question of 'human security.' As Anthony Nyong argues in his article "Resource and Environment Security," in Brainard *et alii*, *Too Poor for Peace*" (p. 73 et passim),

Today, people around the world, particularly in the developing world, are struggling to survive in the face of a multitude of environmental problems – the overuse of natural resources, the degradation of the ecosystem, and extreme climatic events such as floods, droughts, and hurricanes. These problems play an important role in increasing human vulnerability, undermining livelihoods and human well-being, threatening environmental security, and potentially generating or exacerbating conflict.

Francis and his revolutionary movement have been called to once again declare sacred all that God has created and entrusted to human beings. The Franciscan Action Network, much like the Franciscan movement, arises at a particularly critical moment in the course of human history, a moment when the future of the planet and its inhabitants will be decided. As Franciscan environmental scholar Keith Warner argues ("Taking Nature Seriously: Nature Mysticism, Environmental Advocacy and the Franciscan Tradition," *WTU Symposium – Franciscans and Creation – What is our Responsibility*, May 2003, p. 3 *et passim*): "The erosion of our planetary life support systems may be irreversible, yet before full 'scientific proof' can be amassed, it will too late to prevent a series of humanitarian and ecological disasters."

We, the Franciscan Action Network, assume our responsibility as a '**moral ecological community**', and commit to the development of a "socio-political project that can enhance the protection of our natural world." (Warner, 2003, p. 3)

Concluding comment:

It is with much humility that we, the Franciscan family in the United States, unite our energies and resources to form the Franciscan Action Network and Franciscan Action Center. We seek not to create just one more advocacy group clamoring for resources, attention and change; rather, we seek to focus on the three values we, as Franciscans, share with the world, and now seek to share within the beltway of Washington politics. We seek the development of a new and courageous moral vision. It is because of the poor that we exist and name ourselves as participants and fellow travelers on the road to justice and dignity. Violent conflict and the push for a militarized response and control of all the means made available for social reconstruction and development demand that we, as bearers of peace and practitioners of active non-violence, share our vision and commitment with our government and with all who believe that violence can only be responded to with equal or excessive show of force. Threats to the natural environment, which impact most the poor and marginalized, but also bear negative consequences for the entire human family, demand that we place our vision of a moral ecological community at the service of humanity.

We, the Franciscans, stand ready to work in close collaboration with people of all political, religious, cultural and other persuasions on the central themes, which govern our lives and define the most critical issues confronting the human community. We the Franciscans, stand in particular relationship to all of humanity – no turf to defend, no boundaries to

maintain. May our joint efforts bring to birth the type of world necessary for the full promotion of the dignity and well-being of all people, for the care of our natural environment - the vision of humanity and creation renewed in God (Revelations 21, 1-5).