



# St. Francis of Assisi as an Exemplar Par Excellence for a God-Centred Care of Creation

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## Abstract

This article seeks to explore the place of the individual in caring for God's creation in light of St. Francis of Assisi. We live in a society that highly conscious of the individual. The same individual has a responsibility to take care of the creation in response to God who mandated him to steward it from the beginning. In the Biblical account of creation, we hear that Adam was created as an individual and mandated to take care of the garden as an individual. This article is inspired by the late Pope Francis' Encyclical letter *Laudato si'* and Pope Leo XIV's Decree of the Apostolic Penitentiary on the occasion of the Eighth Centenary of the death of Saint Francis of Assisi, by which a special Jubilee Year is proclaimed, with associated Plenary Indulgences. The two pontificates acknowledge the role of St. Francis in the doctrine of stewardship.

## Introduction

This article is inspired by the late Pope Francis' Encyclical letter *Laudato Si'* and Pope Leo XIV's Decree of the Apostolic Penitentiary on the occasion of the Eighth Centenary of the death of Saint Francis of Assisi, by which a special Jubilee Year is proclaimed, with associated Plenary Indulgences.<sup>1</sup> The two pontificates acknowledge the role of St. Francis in the life of the Church. We start by looking at St. Francis of Assisi. We will look at faith, being the main pillar on which his care for God's creation is built. We will further look at creation according to the Bible and according to some of the church father. Finally, we will lay emphasis on the role of the individual in caring for creation as exemplified by St. Francis and supported by the faith in God who through self-communication is revealed in creation. Today, set Francis of Assisi can be used as a fitting reference to reawaken the need to take personal responsibility in caring for the environment.

### 1. St. Francis of Assisi

Francis was born and lived in Italy between 1182 and 1226. He made it his personal responsibility to call the world to conversion in every way possible, everywhere possible. By his way of life, he sought to convert those around him as well as those far from his country. During his time, crusades by the Christians and the Muslims were a common mode of converting people. Crusades were not peaceful ways of living. They were destructive to human beings and their "common home."<sup>2</sup> St. Francis himself had taken part in such destructive activities. During his time, going to Muslim-dominated territories and

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Raoul Manselli, *St. Francis of Assisi*, trans. Paul Duggan, (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1988), 222. St. Francis of Assisi attracted many people because of among many things, penitential preaching.

<sup>2</sup> Francis, Encyclical Letter "*Laudato Si'*" on Care for our Common Home (24 May 2015). *Acta Apostolica Sedis* 107 (2015): 847-945, no. 164. "There has been a growing conviction that our planet is a homeland and that humanity is one people living in a common home."



engaging in refutable faith matters was as good as suicidal much as it is today. St. Francis took a missionary journey to the Muslim-dominated country. He travelled to Africa to meet the Sultan in order to give witness and build peace.<sup>3</sup> It follows then that followers of St. Francis have a duty to go beyond their comfort zones and give witness to Christ. “The brothers should be mindful of St. Francis, who wished to send his followers into the world after the pattern of Christ’s disciples, to proclaim peace everywhere by word and example, in poverty and with complete trust in God the Father.”<sup>4</sup>

It is St Francis of Assisi who inspired Pope Francis the most, in matters of care for the environment as enshrined in the Social Doctrine of the Church. This is evident in both his choosing of a papal name and in his first encyclical letter, *Laudato Si’* in which he clearly states the place of St Francis in care for the environment.

I believe that Saint Francis is the example par excellence of care for the vulnerable and of an integral ecology lived out joyfully and authentically. He is the patron saint of all who study and work in the area of ecology, and he is also much loved by non-Christians. He was particularly concerned for God’s creation and for the poor and outcast. He loved, and was deeply loved for his joy, his generous self-giving, his openheartedness. He was a mystic and a pilgrim who lived in simplicity and in wonderful harmony with God, with others, with nature and with himself. He shows us just how inseparable the bond is between concern for nature, justice for the poor, commitment to society, and interior peace.<sup>5</sup>

St. Francis is only relevant to the church and is held with high esteem by Pope Francis because of his faith in God. To propagate faith in God is the sole purpose of the church. This faith is what made St. Francis of Assisi a great saint.

### **1.1 Faith as Central to St. Francis of Assisi’s Care for Creation**

Faith was central to everything St. Francis of Assisi did.<sup>6</sup> care for creation. He understood creation as a pointer to God. This he did by acknowledging that God created all things perfect. That belief of St. Francis is elemental to the Catholic faith that “God the Father almighty is the creator of heaven and earth of all that is seen and unseen.”<sup>7</sup> The faith discussed here is faith in God, who, according to the Catholic understanding, is a triune God who created the world.<sup>8</sup> According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, “the mystery of the Most Holy Trinity is the central mystery of Christian faith and life. It is the mystery of God himself. It is therefore the source of all the other mysteries of faith, the light that enlightens them. It is the most fundamental and essential teaching in the ‘hierarchy of the truths of faith.’”<sup>9</sup>

Each of the three persons has a role to play in creation, yet intimately connected. It is clear that God the Father is the creator and calls forth into existence all things. The Son, as discussed in the New Testament below, is the Word who was with God at creation. Similarly, the Spirit is understood to give life. This

<sup>3</sup> Cf Raoul Manselli, *St. Francis of Assisi*, 221.

<sup>4</sup> General Curia of the Capuchin Friars Minor, *The Constitution of the Capuchin Friars Minor, The Rule and Testament of Saint Francis of Assisi* (Rome: General Curia of the Capuchin Friars Minor, 2013) no. 179, 1.

<sup>5</sup> Francis, Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si’* no. 10.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Raoul Manselli, *St. Francis of Assisi*, 221. At one point, due to his great faith, Francis “moved only by the ardour of his faith” was able to go among the Muslims.

<sup>7</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Nairobi: Paulines Publication Africa, 2015), no. 279.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. N. Young, *Creator, Creation and Faith*, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1976) 167. It is faith that is constantly threatened. For instance the early Christians were threatened by the gnostics and Marcionists who hardly acknowledged God the creator with God the savior – Christ. Today the threat is more from science and technology that try to purge out God from creation and bringing into existence the universe as it is seen. It is God who is the creator – as indicated in the creed.

<sup>9</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 234.



“Spirit is seen by The Bible as the one who both gives life to in the present and forms into their destined shape the things that have been made.”<sup>10</sup> In short, the three persons relate in this way, that “the spirit is the actuality of God’s radiating presence, filling and firing (that is, enlivening as well as testing) the whole world (Wis 1:7), prompting worship as well as awe (Is 6:3). The spirit is at once intimacy between the father and Christ and the energy that emanates from that intimacy.”<sup>11</sup> Hence, faith in God is faith in the three persons, one God.

Having faith is looking up to a Being beyond rational comprehension. This means that faith is looking up to someone who is unknown and is not readily available to the mind of the one who believes. As it is seen in the book of Exodus, it is believing in a being beyond naming – someone transcendent. “I am who I am” (Ex 3:14). This transcendent Being reveals Himself at will and in His own way. These ways of revelation include creation as well as incarnation. In these ways, he communicates himself and reinforces human faith in Him. According to F. Beeck, “in both creation and incarnation, there is a dynamism of mutuality. In creation we have God’s sovereign, creative self-communication; to which corresponds the creation’s actualization in absolute dependence.”<sup>12</sup>

Creation then becomes important for man in encountering God and the founding of faith in Him for two main reasons. First, it is a living proof that tells about its source. Upon finding himself in the middle of the universe full of different entities, the human person commences to seek understanding of his surroundings. He asks and endeavours to understand where everything comes from and their purpose or their end. “The two questions, the first about the origin and the second about the end, are inseparable. They are decisive for the meaning and orientation of our life and actions.”<sup>13</sup> According to Peter L. Berger, faith enhances the believer’s worldview. “When one decides to have faith, one bets on the ultimate goodness of the world; conversely, one bets that annihilation is not the ultimate fate of everything one holds dear to the world.”<sup>14</sup> N. Young agrees to that when he argues that “to affirm God as the creator is a call to faith in him who gives meaning and purpose to history.”<sup>15</sup> Hence, it is clearly understood, by faith in God, that the world is good as it is created, and in hope the world is destined for a meaningful end. Karl Barth says in *Credo*. He teaches thus:

If there is no question of an identity of the created world with God, no question of its existing under any circumstances as a legitimate possibility (i.e. apart from sin) in formal or material independence over against God, then it necessarily follows that the meaning and the end of the world of His creation is not to be sought in itself, that the purpose and the destiny of this world could only be to serve God as the world’s creator and indeed to serve as ‘theatre of his glory’. [...] He created it for this purpose and with this destiny and therefore created in accordance with this purpose and this destiny and therefore good.<sup>16</sup>

The second reason is that creation speaks and answers to humanity’s questions about the existence of God. The human being is confronted by the contradiction of God and the evil around the universe. This raises the problem of the existence of this good God. When God, who brings all that exists into being,

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<sup>10</sup> C. E. Gunton, *The Triune Creator: A Historical and Systematic Study* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University press 1998) 22.

<sup>11</sup> F. J. Van Beeck, *God Encountered: A Contemporary Catholic Systematic Theology*, Vol. I: understanding the Christian Faith (San Francisco: Harper and Row, publishers 1989) 159.

<sup>12</sup> F. J. Van Beeck, *God Encountered*, 88.

<sup>13</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 282

<sup>14</sup> Berger P. L., *Questions of Faith: A Skeptical Affirmation of Christianity*, (Malden: Backwell Publishing, 2004) 6.

<sup>15</sup> N. Young, *Creator, Creation and Faith*, 65.

<sup>16</sup> K. Barth, *Credo*, (New York: Charles Scribner’s sons, 1962) 32.



does He cease to provide for a harmonious existence thus chaos in the world? Does He go silent? On the contrary, creation reflects His presence and breaks his silence. God reveals himself in creation and his voice is heard in creation. As the psalmist states, “the heavens declare the glory of God; the sky proclaims its builder’s craft. One day to the next conveys that message; one night to the next imparts that knowledge.” (Ps 19:1-4)

Humanity is confronted by constant doubt about the existence of God, to whom he should have faith. This doubt is fueled by human’s inability to go beyond themselves. They endeavor to understand the world around him from an anthropocentric perspective. There is a need to transcend that and eventually come to the realization that the world can only be comprehended in the light of God.

Faith in God involves identity-experience, from which arises a deep-seated thirst for self-awareness – a thirst that we can never fully ‘gather in.’ but the thirst is there; self-awareness demand that we live “examined lives.” Examination of life, however, involves ongoing awareness of the world we live in, both of our microcosms and of the structures of the larger world. All of this occurs in the ultimate perspective of an understanding of the “whole world” – an understanding, again that we cannot ever gather in, as in an intellectual harvest. Bringing the whole world home is, ultimately, to be entrusted to God.<sup>17</sup>

By faith, countless Christians have promoted action for justice so as to put into practice the word of the Lord, who came to proclaim deliverance from oppression and a year of favour for all (cf. Lk 4:18-19). St. Francis of Assisi, due to his faith, represents a perfect example of how much an individual can achieve through faith. He saw everything around himself in light of God. His view of the world was entirely theocentric and less anthropocentric. He is counted among many Christians who made a great impact on earth during their lifetime because he saw all things through the lenses of faith in God.

## 2.0 Creation as an Enhancer to Faith in God

Creation is here understood as the world around man brought forth by God. In other words, creation implies the environment around man, which, according to Richard Rwiza, means the “totality of what we live in.”<sup>18</sup> This comprises land, water, forests, and air among other realities. Creation means the physical work of God. “God brings the entire substance of a thing into existence from a state of non-existence [...] in every kind of production the specific effect had as such not previous existence, and may therefore be said to have been educed *ex nihilo* – from a state of non-existence.”<sup>19</sup>

In the strict sense of the word, if creation means bringing forth into existence out of nothing, *ex nihilo*, then it means that it is reserved to God. Only God can create out of nothing. All else that comes to be, are mere of inventions and discoveries that creation. For instance, one can rightfully say that such a small, yet transformative discovery as a transistor whose role is to conduct power and run megamachines, that dominated manipulate human life is still an invention and it is not a creation. An invention is a concretized thought of the one who invented it. The invented object does not lead back to the inventor nor does it need the inventor for it to continue existing. On the contrary, creation communicates the thought, and leads back to the creator as discussed below and it is sustained by the creator. It means that if the world and all in it is the work of God, then, that which is created speaks the

<sup>17</sup> F. J. Van Beeck, *God Encountered*, 34.

<sup>18</sup> Richard N. Rwiza, *Environmental Ethics: In the African Context* (Nairobi: CUEA Press, 2021) 31.

<sup>19</sup> C. G. Herbermann et al, eds, *The catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 4, (York: The universal Knowledge foundation, New 1908), 470.



mind of God. In other words, the world and all in it helps us to know God. It is also clear that all that is came to be by God's free act in order to communicate himself out of love. According in to Karl Barth, this is understood better that,

We can understand the positing of this reality – which otherwise is incomprehensible – only as the work of love. He wills and posits the creature neither out of caprice nor necessity, but because he has loved it from eternity, because he wills to demonstrate His love for it, and because He wills, not to limit His glory by its existence and being, but to reveal and manifest it in His own co-existence with it.<sup>20</sup>

The idea of creation as an aid to humans' faith in God is drawn from the Scripture as we shall see here below.

## 2.1 The Bible as the Primary Source of St. Francis' Faith

The Bible is the source of the Christian faith. For one to grow in Christian faith, there is no other way than to understand the Bible and embodying its teaching. The Bible is the word of God, meant for human beings. Williamson observes that "Scripture is, at the same time, entirely God's Word and entirely the words of the human authors. [...] God has chosen to communicate with the human race through the limitations of human writing and human language."<sup>21</sup> It is this Word of God that penetrated St. Francis of Assisi and influenced him to live a radical Christian life. In the next section, we look at what the Bible says about creation. It is this understanding of the Bible that makes Francis of Assisi consider creation to be his fraternity.

Additionally, following the example of St. Francis of Assisi, the care of creation because of faith in God is attainable. Strictly speaking, faith is man's response to God's self-communication. Faith, put differently, is doing justice to God.<sup>22</sup> This self-communication of God is evident in his creation. Creation should therefore be looked at as a pointer to Him. In the light of faith, creation is well understood as a sacrament because a simple understanding of sacrament is that it is the outward sign of inward grace.<sup>23</sup> First, we shall start by looking at the Old Testament.

### 2.1.1 Old Testament

The main question here is; what does the Old Testament say about creation that St. Francis of Assisi took so much interest in? The answer to that is that God is the origin of all things according to the Old Testament. There are two accounts in the Bible giving relatively different accounts of the order of creation but do not contradict the fact that God is the creator. These are Yahwistic tradition and the priestly tradition. According to the Yahwistic Tradition, God created man and later brought forth that which surrounds man. In fact, according to this account man is placed in the middle of God's work of creation. God created heaven and earth and made rain bring forth what grew on earth and only later did he form man and placed him in charge of that which grew. He later, by His word brought about other creatures to coexist with man. The last to come about is the woman who was created out of man (Gn 2:4-25).

The second account is priestly account and it appears at the beginning of the book of Genesis. In the account human is created at the end of creation after all else was created. He is placed as superior to all other created things because he has the image of God. "God created man in his image; in the divine

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<sup>20</sup> Barth K., *Church Dogmatics*, trans. G.W. Bromiley (New York: Harper and Row Publishers 1961), 150.

<sup>21</sup> P.S. Williamson, *Catholic Principles for Interpretation Scripture*, (Rome: Pontifical Instituto Biblico 1993) 30.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. F. J. Van Beeck, *God Encountered*, 37.

<sup>23</sup> C. G. Herbermann, et al, eds, *The catholic Encyclopedia*, vol 8, 295.



image he created him; male and female he created them.” (Gen 1:27). In this account, it is clear that the rest of creation is at the service of man. It follows then that that which God has given to man at his service should enable man to the knowledge of God. According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, man’s end is ultimately God. He was created to love serve and know his creator. “God created everything for man, but in turn was created to serve and love God and to offer creation back to him.”<sup>24</sup>

In the above discussed accounts that God created by his divine word. The word means speech and further means communication between the two, the creator and the created. In this case, it means calling forth the creation by the creator, hence establishing a divine relationship between the two. According to Oliver Davies, an encounter with God, through his word, the creature is shaped and renamed. This happens when Moses encounters God in the burning bush.<sup>25</sup> Let us now look at the New Testament which is also a fulfilment of the Old Testament.

### 2.1.2 The New Testament

In the New Testament, the main focus is the revelation of God the Father through the incarnation Jesus Christ. “In the incarnation, God graciously and freely encounters humanity and the world with the offer of the gift of divine self-communication; humanity and the world are thus empowered to respond, in turn, to God, in an act of total abandon, conscious and freely.”<sup>26</sup> Faith is about responding to God who communicates himself through Jesus Christ, His only Son, who was with him in creation. Be that as it may, the New Testament attention to Christ makes it possible to know the role of Christ in creation. Here, we understand two major roles that Christ plays in creation.

First, as previously discussed, all things came to be through the Word of God. Jesus is that Word of God who was with God before all came to be. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came to be through him, and without him nothing came to be.” (Jh 1:1-3) This is the first role in creation. Through Him, all things came to be. According to Colin E Gunton, “Christ is in some way the framework of all things.”<sup>27</sup>

The second role of Jesus in creation is to knit into one all that is brought into existence and make is to continue to exist. The first letter to the Corinthians explicitly says that, it is “Jesus Christ, through whom all things are and through whom we exist”(1 Cor 8:6). Noteworthy, after sin had entered the world, he took the human form in order to assume the nature of the creature and hence redirect it to the original purpose.

He is the creator and not creation, but he is also, in realization rather than denial of that transcendence, one who in Christ becomes part of that creation, freely involved within its structures, in order that he may, in obedience to God the father and through the power of his Spirit, redirect the creation to its eschatological destiny.<sup>28</sup>

St. Francis of Assisi’s Faith was primarily founded on the teaching of the Bible as we have seen above. Nonetheless, he was also a Christian with respect for the Church’s long standing Tradition as discussed here below.

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<sup>24</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 358.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Davies O., *The Creativity of God: World Eucharist, Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2004), 79.

<sup>26</sup> F. J. Van Beeck, *God Encountered*, 88.

<sup>27</sup> C. E. Gunton, *The Triune Creator*, 22.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.



## 2.3 St. Francis and the Tradition of the Church

When a group of men voluntarily followed St. Francis of Assisi, fully aware of the need to be one with the church, he sought the approval of the church during the pontificate of Honorius III.<sup>29</sup> St. Francis of Assisi was aware of the oneness of the Church. He was a guardian of the long preserved oneness of the church and the orthodoxy of their teaching. He was a steward of the Tradition of the Church. Hence, whatever he taught and lived was in line with the teachings of those ahead of him. St. Francis stands a one who embodies the teaching of some of these church fathers centuries after they were gone, therefore safeguarding the Tradition of the Church.

According to the Church Fathers, creation is the way in which God is known by the rational being. The fathers reverberated what is clearly indicated in the scriptures. According to Origen of Alexandria, creation is doubtlessly a pointer to God's orderliness. God put things in order as indicated above in the Old Testament. Colin E. Gunton observes that according to Origen, "God is the one who created and set in order all things, and who when nothing existed, caused the universe to be."<sup>30</sup>

Through the writings of the Church Fathers, it becomes clear that God is in constant communication with his creation. This, however, does not diminish His nature as God. He is transcendent beyond creation, according to Irenaeus, "God is ontologically transcendent, as creator of everything else that exists. But by virtue of his triune nature, God the Father is able to enter into personal relationship with created order by mediating activity of his two hands, the Son and the Spirit, who are as truly God as he is God."<sup>31</sup>

According to St. Augustine, God is known to be what the world is not. That while what is created is limited to time and space, God is not. In other words, creation is finite while God is infinite. "The universe must therefore have a beginning, an absolute beginning in time. It had a beginning and will have an end, just like us, because only God is eternal."<sup>32</sup> This idea of time is related to eschatology because of the resurrection of Christ. Colin E. Gunton says that: God, while not being tied to time, is not its negation [...] God is, indeed involved, in time, so that creation's reality is affirmed."<sup>33</sup> Accordingly, it becomes clear that time is just like any other in the realm of created entities. God is thus not subject to time because He is the Creator setting Him apart from the rest of creation and not subject to time.

Worth noting, despite the convincing arguments used by the above discussed Fathers of the church, Francis did not employ this complex language. Instead, St. Francis considered himself a lowly creature and one of with the rest of creation. Hence a need to be a brother to all other created entities.

## 2.4 St. Francis of Assisi as a Person Creature in God's Image

St. Francis of Assisi was fully conscious of this littleness and thus looked at himself as a brother to all other creatures. He is the epitome of humility and a fitting example for all human beings. He is referred to as "God's poor little man of Assisi."<sup>34</sup> Earlier, we saw that his main source of faith is the Scripture. In the Scripture, God created man and woman in his own image (Gen 1:27). This human person is a

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<sup>29</sup> Johannes Jörgensen, *Saint Francis of Assisi, a Biography*, trans. T. O'Connor Sloane (New York: Longmans, Green and Co. 1931), 165.

<sup>30</sup> C. E. Gunton, *The Triune Creator*, 57.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. C.E. Gunton, *The Triune Creator*, 60.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>34</sup> Johannes Jörgensen, *Saint Francis of Assisi*, 165.



composite being consisting of body and soul.<sup>35</sup> He is both physical and spiritual. The physical is material, and the spiritual is immaterial. “From ancient times, there has been an appreciation of the fact that human beings are not simply a sum of skills, but a unity of body and soul with a coordinating centre that provides a backdrop of meaning and direction to all that a person experiences.”<sup>36</sup>

These two are referred to as body and soul. Robert O. Johann notes that this kind of perception of the human person is also known as the ‘two lives’ theory. “Man is thought to have two lives side by side, corresponding to the two components of his nature. He has an outer, bodily life of interaction with the world, and an inner, spiritual life that lifts him above the world.”<sup>37</sup>

However, this dichotomising argument for the human life may not necessarily be true because human beings do not have two lives. Instead, it should be understood that the body and the soul complement each other. They are both existentially grooved together that if any of them is less cared for, the other one suffers disintegration. He is an individual, one being with a body and a soul that are integrally locked together for existence. The physical body is important for the physical experiences of the human person, and the soul is important for the spiritual experiences of the human person.

We saw earlier that the human person sits at the apex of creation to steward what God had created. This care of creation is both for humanity’s own wellbeing and for the good of other created beings around him. Humanity was not created to exploit the creation for its own selfish benefits. God created the human beings and put them in charge in order to take care of creation and enhance his relationship with God and creation (Gen. 2:15). According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, “The sign of man’s familiarity with God is that God places him in the garden. There he lives ‘to till it and keep it’ work is not yet a burden, but rather the collaboration of man and woman with God in perfecting the visible creation.”<sup>38</sup>

Due to this duty to till and care, as argued here below, those inspired and willing to follow the footprints of St. Francis engage in this noble and fundamental call to till and care as mandated by God. Their mission is to sensitise the universe about the need to change the human perception of creation from an object of exploitation to a sacrament that points to God. In other words, there is a need to change from a view of creation as expendable resources ready for exploitation, to a view of creation as a divinely intended good that needs care. St. Francis is a perfect example of all human beings whose care for creation is based on faith in God. His contribution is above all an individual enterprise. Everything that St. Francis of Assisi ended up becoming started with his personal conversion.

## 1. The Impact of the Individual in Caring for Creation

We saw earlier that God created the man, as an individual, and later created a woman, the second individual. They were created separately, although they have to live together. That means that the mandate to care for what God created is primarily an individual responsibility. In the book of Joshua, Joshua takes a personal position, even when the rest of the Israelites thought otherwise. He states firmly

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<sup>35</sup> Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Nairobi: Paulines Publication Africa, 2004), no. 129. “Man has two different characteristics: he is a material being, linked to this world by his body, and he is a spiritual being open to transcendence.”

<sup>36</sup> Francis, Encyclical Letter *Dilexit Nos*, On the Human Love of the Heart of Jesus Christ (24 October 2024), (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2024) no. 3.

<sup>37</sup> Robert O. Johann, *Building the Human*, 57.

<sup>38</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 378.



that as for him and his household they would do God's will (Jos 24:15).<sup>39</sup> The impact of the individual's personal in every progress is undeniable. However, this individual responsibility, without aiming at the wellness of others in the community, can easily degenerate into individualism.<sup>40</sup> Certain individuals have successfully balanced between healthy sense individuality and community care. Such an individual is Wangari Maathai, who attributed her success to the Catholic Church missionaries' support.<sup>41</sup>

### 3.1 St. Francis of Assisi's Individual Contribution in Caring for God's Creation

This year, we are celebrating 800 years in commemoration of St Francis. Pope Leo XIV, in the eighth centenary of St. Francis of Assisi, declared the saint as perfect example for others to emulate.

His Holiness Pope Leo XIV, Minister of our faith and our joy, establishes that, from 10 January 2026, coinciding with the closing of the Ordinary Jubilee, until 10 January 2027, a special Year of Saint Francis shall be proclaimed, in which every faithful Christian, following the example of the Saint of Assisi, shall become a model of holiness of life and a constant witness of peace.<sup>42</sup>

Why is St. Francis Assisi such an important figure in the life of the church? It is because of two reasons. First, his understanding of creation as a sacrament that points to its source – the creator. Second, his faith in God was his primary source of confidence in his view of creation as one family. In the Cantic of the Sun, he refers to all things as brothers and sisters.<sup>43</sup> St. Francis stands as the epitome of individualised care for God's creation. He is a clear indication that the individual's formation and conviction are significant in caring for the environment. He may not have had as much technology as we have today, but a perfect representation of humility that is necessary for the care of the environment made him outstanding. His exemplary humility drove him into reckoning himself as a brother to all created beings and all that is known to human beings, including death, which he calls sister death.<sup>44</sup> However, according to William R. Hugo, "retrieval of Francis began to wane after 1950s so that St. Francis' relationship with nature was in serious danger of being ignored. Things changed when the environmental movement became popular, and in the late 1960s and early 1970s. John Paul II proclaimed St. Francis the patron saint of the environment."<sup>45</sup> The renewed outlook on St. Francis as the patron saint of the environment has kept growing ever since.

St Francis of Assisi was considered special only because he lived in accordance with his very nature as a human being who cared. In the doctrine of intergenerational justice, he rightfully deserves the immortalization his name has been accorded by other generations that have come after him. In his

<sup>39</sup> Cf. James L. Mays, et al, eds. *Harper's Bible Commentary* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1988), 243.

<sup>40</sup> Samuel Bedijo, *The Moral Problem Posed by Individualism in the Church in Africa, A Case Study in Nebbi Catholic Diocese in North-Western Uganda*, (Bavaria: EOS Verlag Sankt Otilien, 2015) 93. "Intensely understood, individualism poses a radical moral problem which goes to the heart of community life. For the Alur this means *lalu waat*, undoing, disjoining, rifting apart, breaking the cord of kinship; and *nyotho waat*, corrupting, spoiling, destroying (the spirit of) kinship. It gives blind reasons for one to absent oneself from habitual participation in communal activities like eating together, sharing, burial, helping those in need, or coming together to solve community problems."

<sup>41</sup> P. Mwendwa., "How Catholic Missionaries Groomed Professor Wangari Maathai" in *The Seed* 23 (November 2011) 9. "they made me who I am and may ever be."

<sup>42</sup> Holy See Press Service, "Decree of the Apostolic Penitentiary on the occasion of the Eighth Centenary of the death of Saint Francis of Assisi, by which a special Jubilee Year is proclaimed, with associated Plenary Indulgences, 16.01.2026" retrieved from

<https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2026/01/16/260116c.html> (accessed 9.2.2026).

<sup>43</sup> Francis, Encyclical Letter "*Laudato Si*" no. 1

<sup>44</sup> Cf. St Francis of Assisi, "Cantic of Creatures," retrieved from <https://www.xavier.edu/mission-identity/programs/documents/4final-canticofthecreatures-bird-prayercard.docx.pdf> (accessed 27.1.2024)

<sup>45</sup> Cf. William R. Hugo, *Studying the Life of Saint Francis of Assisi: A Beginner's Workbook*, 2nd ed. (New York: New City Press 2011), 138.



generation, he cared for the environment. He did it for the generation of his time and the generations after him.<sup>46</sup> Additionally, St. Francis, deeply aware of his limitations, never intended to limit others to himself. He said to his followers, “no one showed me what I had to do, but the Most High Himself revealed to me.”<sup>47</sup> This is a person who does not intend to impose his beliefs or patronise the people who looked up to him. St Francis desired that his followers look up to God in Faith for guidance with humility. Such humility as epitomized by St. Francis is a contradiction of the often anthropocentric exploitation of the natural environment in which human beings call home. His way is a perfect for prevention of conflicts.<sup>48</sup>

Each person has a unique obligation as an individual to care for what belongs to future generations. The call to be stewards and not as destructors is primarily an individual responsibility. The individual has to care for what belongs to the community for future generations. Richard Rwiza argues that the responsibility and duty of the future generation lies with the present generation.<sup>49</sup> His effort, 800 years later, clearly demonstrable among his followers, continues to make an impact on the lives of many generations after him.

## Conclusion

In this article, the intention has been to understand St. Francis of Assisi as a perfect example of stewards of creation. It started by looking at St. Francis of Assisi. We discussed his faith in the triune God as the main reason for his stewardship. Thereafter, we discussed creation in the Bible as well as the understanding of its according to some of the fathers of the church. We discussed God as one who communicates Himself freely through His work of creation. The world around human beings is His work and this work should lead man to the creator. Creation hence, is necessary so as to enable the human person to come close to God in faith. We hence emphasised that, just like St. Francis of Assisi, each person, on the individual level, has a duty to take care of creation as epitomised by St. Francis of Assisi.

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<sup>46</sup> Cf. Richard Wanyeki, “Politics will Pass, but Our Land, Legacy must Remain” in *Daily Nation*, 7 August 2025:16.

<sup>47</sup> General Curia of the Capuchin Friars Minor, *The Constitution of the Capuchin Friars Minor, The Rule and Testament of Saint Francis of Assisi* (Rome: General Curia of the Capuchin Friars Minor, 2013) XIII.

<sup>48</sup> Conflict between man and environment is not something new. It arises from man’s conviction that he owns the environment. Hence, land should be exploited to the maximum because the scripture says “fill the earth and subdue it.” (Gen 1:28). On the contrary, man ought to be a caretaker, and not a domineering and exploitive owner. He does not own land. In the book of Leviticus it is said that “the land shall not be sold in perpetuity; for the land is mine, and you are but aliens who have become my tenants” (Lev 25:23).

<sup>49</sup> Cf. Richard N. Rwiza, *Environmental Ethics*, 153-154. Echoing the late Pope Francis’ strong belief, St. Francis is the example par excellence for all human beings who on the individual level care for the vulnerable and of an integral ecology for the good of the community. Cf. Francis, Encyclical Letter “*Laudato Si*” no. 10.



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