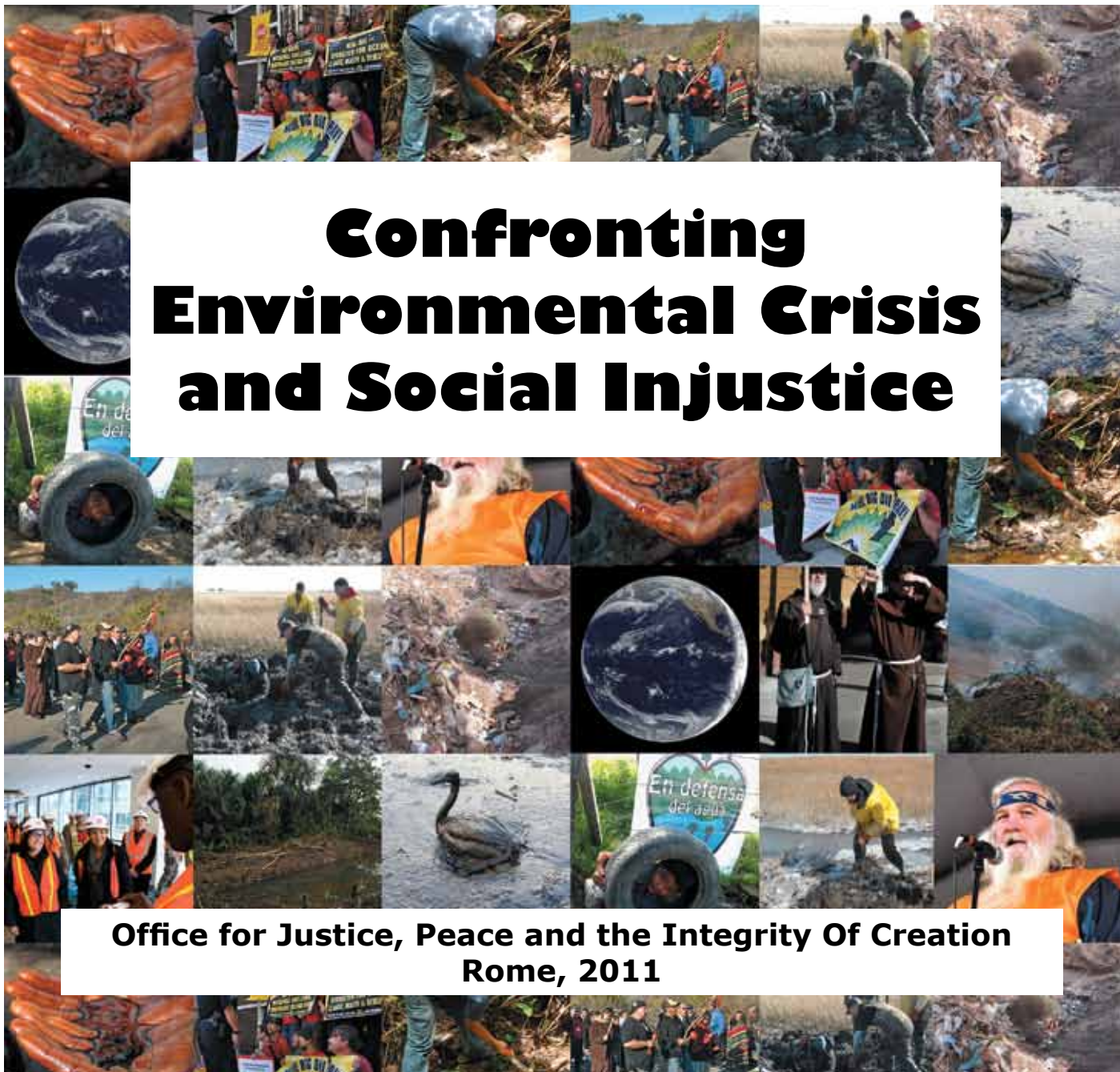




Order of Friars Minor

Franciscans And Environmental Justice



Confronting Environmental Crisis and Social Injustice

**Office for Justice, Peace and the Integrity Of Creation
Rome, 2011**

INTRODUCTION

The OFM General Chapters of 2003 and 2009 encouraged friars to be aware of and involved in environmental issues. This document is intended to help friars throughout the world reflect on the environmental crisis we are all facing, and to invite them to become active in addressing the problems that afflict all of us, especially the poor.

The first section deals with the motivation for this task that arises from the spirituality of Francis. The second section speaks of the new ethic that is needed to address the new reality of a globalized world. The third section explains the meaning of environmental justice, which joins our traditional concern for human rights to a concern for the health of the created world. The fourth section presents four situations that help to highlight the kinds of issues involved in environmental justice. Finally, the fifth section is an exhortation to “read the signs of the times” and to choose concrete actions that will address our current crisis.

I. FRANCISCAN MOTIVATION FOR ADDRESSING THE CRISIS

The spirituality of Francis of Assisi offers a strong motivation to Franciscans to become thoroughly involved in efforts to deal with the current environmental crisis. It highlights a special concern and responsibility for our mother Earth and for all of Creation, arising from a desire to follow in the footsteps of Francis. He was named patron saint of ecology by John Paul II¹ in 1979 for a reason. He did not confront the same questions that we do, and the environment in his time did not face the same global threats, but his approach to the world and his relationship to nature point us in the right direction. They remind us of the moral imperative to address the crisis that threatens our planet and all its inhabitants.

Unlike the common spirituality of his time, Francis did not separate the spiritual world from the material world, and he certainly did not look down upon the material world as godless. He viewed the earth and everything in nature as God’s creation, as a place of incarnation. Francis related to all created things – living or inanimate – with great respect and sought to be subject to them. This attitude is different from a spir-

ituality that sees human beings as rulers of the earth. Francis did not see human beings as above or outside the rest of nature. He saw them as sisters and brothers, fellow creatures of the same God. He expressed his spirituality uniquely and poetically in the *Canticle of the Creatures*,² composed at the end of his life. The canticle does not simply praise God for creation. Francis did not stand outside of nature to thank God for this gift. Rather, he stood alongside the community of creatures and – as part of that community – praised God as the source of all life and creation. The creatures’ praise of God consists in their being what they are – that they become what they were created to be.

That is what differentiates Francis’s spirituality from a concern for the environment which only relates to the future of humankind. In the spirit of Francis, care for creation springs from a deep respect for and interior solidarity with everything that God has created. Francis sensed the unity of the entire cosmos. Saint Paul said that the community of Christians forms the body of Christ, that the joys and sufferings of each individual member contribute to the well-being and

1 Cf. message of John Paul II for World Day of Peace: *Peace with God the Creator, Peace with all of Creation*, January 1, 1990 (# 16).

2 For the text of the Canticle see: <http://www.appleseeds.org/canticle.htm>.

to the suffering of the entire body (cf. 1 Cor. 12:12-31; Col. 1:18; 2:18-20; Eph. 1:22-23; 3:19; 4:13). For Francis, the same truth applies to the entire cosmos. Today we can see confirmation of his insight in scientific reports: destruction in one part of the world is leading to suffering throughout the world.

The respect and solidarity of Francis toward creatures were manifest in interior and practical attitudes of obedience. Through the vow of obedience a religious hands him or herself over completely to God through the mediation of another person. Francis extended this concept to include subjection to every human being and to all animals, wild or tame. He offered a theological reason for this subjection: obeying the creatures, one obeys the Creator from whom they come forth, who allows each one to be, to act and to express its own needs.

For this reason, Francis looked at life from the perspective of these creatures. He understood their vital needs. His attitude was one of deep empathy, which prompted him to look for suitable ways to defend the environment according to the needs of each living being. We see here a concern not only for individual creatures but for the place where they live as well. It is an incipient invitation to care for the *habitat*, to protect the integrity of the ecosystem, thus guaranteeing the inter-relationships that ensure survival. Rivalry and attempts to abuse and to dominate do not make sense. Human beings and other creatures are made to care for and help one another, thus realizing the good for which God has created them.

Where there is no perception of threat, there is no fear. Creatures obeyed Francis because somehow they sensed his goodness, care and desire to help them survive and thrive. He came before them unarmed, not looking to profit from his dealings with them, willing to give of himself for their benefit. This is what happens, in different ways, in the stories about the wolf of Gub-

bio³ and the lambs in the Marches⁴. Francis demonstrated relations that promote reconciliation and that bring all together in mutual obedience, allowing them to be themselves and to praise God. Friendship, even tenderness, always wins out.

The attitude of Francis provides a solid foundation for our efforts to address the ecological problems we are facing. Our General Constitutions say: "Following closely in the footsteps of Francis, the friars are to maintain a reverent attitude towards nature, threatened from all sides today, in such a way that they may restore it completely to its condition of brother and to its role of usefulness to all humankind for the glory of God the Creator" (GGCC 71). General Chapter 2009 has requested that "in the next six years (2009-2015) all Entities of the Order, with the help of the JPIC Office, examine the impact of our style of life on creation, especially regarding climate change, and promote environmental justice in order to highlight the relationship between social and ecological themes."

To implement this chapter decision we must first understand the meaning of the term "environmental justice." This is the goal of the present text. The JPIC Office in Rome has prepared a another document that deals with the second vital question raised by the Chapter decision: the ecological impact of our lives on the rest of God's creation.



3 Cf. Franciscan sources: *The Deeds of Blessed Francis and His Companions*, XXIII.

4 Cf. 1 Celano, 77-79.

II. A NEW ETHIC FOR A GLOBALIZED WORLD

Before we discuss the question of environmental justice, it is important to consider the world in which we live. Our inspiration for confronting contemporary problems comes from Francis, but the world has changed enormously in the eight centuries since he founded his movement. In the time of Francis, most people lived in their own enclosed worlds. Travel and communication were difficult, trade and other contemporary economic structures were just beginning to develop, population was small, most people lived in rural areas and were involved in agriculture and animal husbandry, and the formation of nation-states had not yet begun. Francis and his contemporaries could not even begin to imagine the complex world in which we live today, nor the problems that accompany such complexity. For this reason we need to understand the world in which we live in order to apply the values of Francis in effective ways.

It has been said that our world is becoming a global village. This process is fueled by a series of globalizing tendencies. Among them:

- Instantaneous communication has made it possible for people across the globe to follow current events and to be in contact with one another.
- The existence of global economic institutions like the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organization highlights the growing integration of the world's economy.
- Growing acceptance of human responsibility for the phenomenon of greenhouse gases and climate change demonstrates how we all share one atmosphere, and how human action in one part of the world affects the lives of everyone on the planet.
- Travel and extensive migration have broken down many geographic and cultural barriers, and have fostered

an intermingling of peoples and cultures.

- The policies and actions of the United Nations and other international actors like the World Court have shown an incipient interest in structures that will be able to address problems on a global scale.

Given the existence and growth of these globalizing tendencies, various people and organizations are calling for a different kind of ethic to deal with this new situation. In 2001 a United Nations report noted that: "...someone else's poverty very soon becomes one's own problem: of lack of markets for one's products, illegal immigration, pollution, contagious disease, insecurity, fanaticism, terrorism."¹ This citation underlines the urgent need to find principles and structures that are capable of addressing our common problems.

- Peter Singer, in his book *One World: The Ethics of Globalization*, calls for development of the ethical foundations for the coming era of a single world community, and for strengthening institutions of global decision-making while making them more responsible to the people they affect.²
- Many commentators speak of an ethics of sustainability, which is built on three pillars: environmental protection, economic development and social equity.³ At the same time, some critics advise caution against those corporate interests that skillfully use the term sustainability as a public relation ploy rather than making sustainability an operative prin-

1 Cf. www.un.org/esa/ffd/a55-1000.pdf.

2 Singer, Peter. *One World: The Ethics of Globalization*, second edition. Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2004.

3 Cf., for example: Warner, Keith Douglass, OFM. *The Spirituality of our Sustainability Work: Cultivating an Ethic of Care*, Sustainability Booklet 2, Santa Clara University. See www.scu.edu/kwarner.

ciple of their actions.

- In the book *Care for Creation: A Franciscan Spirituality of the Earth*, the authors propose a “familial or kinship ethic” which highlights relations of solidarity with creation. This approach springs from the attitude of Francis toward God and creation, and offers to the Church and society a new paradigm for living in the world.⁴
- The final document of the Sixth International Conference on Ethics and Climate Change, promoted by the Fondazione Lanza in Padova, Italy, proposes a need for “precaution” in regard to climate change. They recognize that in order to adequately respond to global climate change, the global community must be fully engaged on the scientific, technological, political and economic levels in order to address our current eco-

logical crisis.⁵

All of these authors recognize the interdependence of the peoples and nations of the world. In an attempt to highlight this same relationship, friars involved in JPIC work have chosen to make environmental justice the umbrella concept for our work over the next six years. We have made this choice in order to underline a double concern. The first is our traditional concern to guarantee the dignity of all people by defending their human rights. The second is a growing concern with the unprecedented ecological crisis that we are facing. There is growing consensus that the climatic changes we are experiencing are the result of human activity, and that we are reaching a point of no return in the process. The following reflections will help to explain and develop this decision, and to clarify the concepts that we are using.

4 Delio, Ilia, O.S.F.; Warner, Keith Douglass, O.F.M.; Wood, Pamela. *Care for Creation: A Franciscan Spirituality of the Earth*. St. Anthony Messenger Press, Cincinnati, 2008, pp. 77-79.

5 *Ethics and Climate Change. Scenarios for Justice and Sustainability*. Final document: Sixth International Conference on Ethics and Environmental Policies. Padova, Italy, October 23-25, 2008.



III. ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

The phrase environmental justice links the concepts of ecology and social justice. It highlights the strong relationship that exists between the ecological question, and the issues of justice, peace and the defense of the rights of individuals and peoples. It calls for the fair treatment of all races, cultures, income classes and educational levels with respect to the development and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies. Fair treatment implies that no population should be forced to shoulder a disproportionate share of exposure to the negative effects of pollution or other environmental dangers due to lack of political or economic strength. The worldwide attack on the environment has become, in reality, an assault on the poor and a form of environmental racism.

The destruction of the planet and the pollution of its resources arise in the context of our current economic model which produces much violence, hunger and inequality. In this system it is the poorest who lose their lands and fields, who suffer the wars provoked by the great powers over natural resources, and whose lands are turned into dumps for the trash of the rich. The poor are forced to leave their homes and lands in many parts of the world, not only because of traditional reasons like war and violence, but increasingly because of environmental causes like drought, floods, desertification, disappearance of species, etc. (those uprooted by such disasters are increasingly referred to as "environmental refugees" or "climate refugees"). It is the poor who most suffer the consequences of the ecological crisis.



The quality of human life is integrally tied to the quality of the environment. Without healthy and sustainable ecosystems, the quality of life for all creatures will continue to deteriorate. So it seems only logical that promoting human dignity means promoting healthy ecosystems as well. We need to rethink and to change our current economic model and consumerist mentality, which are leading causes of loss of biodiversity and climate change.

CIDSE (International Cooperation for Development and Solidarity), an international network of 16 Catholic development agencies, notes how climate change is primarily a matter of global justice and equity, and not just an environmental issue. They write that the impact of human-induced climate change disproportionately affects the poor and vulnerable people who live in developing countries. They suffer the greatest effects of a global problem they have done least to create.¹ These effects include major natural disasters; lack of food security; inadequate access to clean, safe water; and increasing health risks.² CIDSE calls for rapid and effective measures to deal

with climate change, noting the special responsibility of developed nations, due to their previously unchecked consumption of natural resources. They must begin to pay for the solutions and to ensure that developing countries can pursue development paths which do not provoke further climate change.³

1 Cf. www.cidse.org, CIDSE position paper on development and climate change, p. 4.

2 CIDSE position paper, pp. 9-11.

3 CIDSE position paper, p. 13.



In the Church, there has been growing awareness of ecological issues. After Vatican II, in regard to the Church's involvement in the world, the primary focus was on social justice. This remained very much the case until the pontificate of John Paul II. His increasing concern with environmental issues was synthesized in his 1990 World Day of Peace message, *Peace with God the Creator, Peace with all Creation*.⁴ It signaled the awakening of the official Catholic Church to the dangers of the environmental crisis for all life forms. In 2001 he expanded this reflection and called all people to an "ecological conversion,"

4 Cf. John Paul II, *Peace with God the Creator, Peace with all Creation*, January 1, 1990, Message for World Day of Peace. See http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/messages/peace/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_19891208_xxiii-world-day-for-peace_en.html .

understood as an increasing sensitivity to ecological issues, urging them to take a critical look at their lifestyles, stressing the importance of an education in ecological responsibility, and emphasizing that the ecological crisis is a moral issue.⁵ Benedict XVI has echoed this concern, lamenting a lack of attention by modern theologians to the value of the created world. He has said that the human race must listen to the voice of the Earth or risk destroying its very existence.⁶

5 Cf. John Paul II, General Audience, Wednesday, January 17, 2001. See http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/audiences/2001/documents/hf_jp-ii_aud_20010117_en.html .

6 Cf. Benedict XVI, Meeting with Clergy of the Dioceses of Belluno-Feltre and Trevisino, Italy, July 24, 2007. See http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2007/july/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20070724_clero-cadore_en.html .

IV. EXPERIENCES OF AND REFLECTIONS ON ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

The previous reflections have served to define the term environmental justice. It is helpful, however, to offer instances in which friars or others are living out this concept in their lives and ministry. The following four experiences present different situations where issues of justice and the environment intersect. They will hopefully invite all of us to reflect on the concrete reality of our own lives and ministries, and on the need to address the problems that affect our brothers and sisters and the environment.

1. Indonesia: Mining Industry and the Dream of Prosperity

Peter Aman, OFM

There is no evidence that the majority of Indonesians are becoming more prosperous as a result of the mining industry in our country. In Sirise, West Flores, a manganese mine has been in operation since the 1980s. Mountains have been flattened, forests crushed and manganese mined to make money, but the life of the local people stays the same, and has even worsened.

When the mining company arrived, people were promised social and economic well-being in exchange for handing over their land to the company. Since then the people have lost their land and they work hard in the mine for the minimum wage of 24,000 rupiah per day (US\$2.40).

Indonesia is a country overwhelmed by mining companies. In West Papua, Free Port Enterprises exploits a huge area of land for gold, but the Papuan people in the area are still poor, marginalized and impoverished. Damage to the ecosystems of small Indonesian islands is causing migration to other islands and to the cities. Again in Flores, a company is preparing to mine near a tourist area, which will affect beaches, hotels, water, air, etc., along with nearby Comodo National Park. We can offer other stories of misery, but they all reveal the same truth: the mining industry impoverishes people, instead of providing well-being and prosperity.

The mining industry is ecologically problematic since it directly damages the land through its excavations. It changes the structure of the soil and thus the land loses its fertility. It causes the land to lose its ability to sustain living beings, including humans.



Another damaging effect of the mining industry is the waste it produces, which spoils land, water and air. This pollution directly endangers the health of people and causes miserable diseases. The mining industry destroys the life of human beings and other creatures.

From the perspective of local culture and wisdom, land is not only an economic commodity, but is the source of life for all living beings. For this reason land is never claimed as personal property, but remains communal. Many local societies in Indonesia call land "mother," due to its generosity in growing things and producing fruits for the life of the people.

Land is an integral part of the life of these people, and has elevated status. It receives cultural and ritual respect, expressed in a special rite to honor the land, along with water and forests. Land cannot be separated from human existence.

In other words, to exploit land means to damage the entire life of the people. The mining industry is destructive by nature, destructive of both nature and humanity.

Then why do people allow the presence and activity of the mining industry? Through experience and investigation, we have found two main reasons. First is the promise of prosperity and the common good. Second is the ignorance of the local people about the mining industry and its impact on their life and ecology.

It is right that the mining industry makes money. But who profits? Where does the money go? The answer is easy. Capitalists and governments, along with their cronies, receive the money. The local community supposedly benefits from the "trickle down effect," which is usually implemented by means of "Community Social Responsibility" (CSR). Through CSR mining companies provide public services for the people like dams, clean water, clinics, schools, electricity, roads, etc.. But the quality of these services often leaves much to be desired, and they function only while the companies are present. CSR is like lipstick, offering cosmetic services for only a very short

time. It does not improve the quality of life of the people. Simple local people have been "poisoned" by the promise of these public services, provided for a short time and paid for by the loss of their lands and forests for ever.

People in general do not have enough knowledge about the mining industry and its impact on their life and on nature. The industry uses this shortcoming to manipulate the local population with promises of welfare and prosperity. The promises are rarely realized, while on the other hand the people always lose their land and environment.

Up to the present, no company has repaired the damages or restored the nature destroyed during their mining activities. The process is very expensive and no mining company has accepted its responsibility. This industry has been bad for Indonesians in terms of human rights, the common good and ecological destruction. We have seen no other kind of approach to "development" on the part of the mining industry, and have thus come to the conclusion that we must say: **NO TO THE MINING INDUSTRY!!!!**



2. The Enigma of Abundance and the Degradation of the Environment in Africa

Gianfrancesco Sisto, OFM
and Michael Perry, OFM

Her name is Mama Nyambura. She and her children live in Mathare Valley, one of a number of urban slums located in Nairobi. Mathare stands out in a particular way because of the more than 500,000 people inhabiting shacks built of rusting sheet metal or cardboard. Its smell wafts over Nairobi due to the lack of proper sewage and sanitation. During the rainy season, poorly constructed latrines overrun, spewing human excrement into the footpaths and roadways, and even into the homes and businesses of Mathare's inhabitants.

No garbage collection takes place in this valley of poverty and disease. In such an environment, cholera, malaria, and water born diseases thrive. They wreak havoc on those who barely survive on the paltry wages they earn or through a continuous cycle of

bartering of goods and services. Welcome to the social and economic reality of many who live in and around Nairobi and in other urban slums in Kenya and on the African sub-continent.

One of the major reasons why Mathare exists is because of a history of land expropriation in Kenya dating at least as far back as the time of colonialism. The colonial legacy helps explain why things were the way they were at the time of Kenya's independence in 1963. Land laws developed during the colonial period were exploited by politicians, and by Kenyan and non-Kenyan economic players. Multinational corporations also have contributed in a significant way to the forced expropriation of lands and the forcible displacement of

ordinary citizens from different regions in the country. Mama Nyambura's situation in Mathare Valley is but a single example of the millions of Kenyans who find themselves caught in the vicious circle of landlessness that oftentimes has given rise to violence, particularly around the time of elections in the country. Urban slums in Kenya often become centers of major discontent; their inhabitants become pliable tools in the hands of dishonest politicians who manipulate the plight of the urban landless masses along ethnic identity lines in order to weaken political opponents and strengthen their own political fortunes. All of this comes at a cost to those caught in chronic poverty. Ethnic identity and abject poverty are two realities which allow and promote continuing manipulation

and expropriation of Kenya's most important natural resource, its rich and fertile lands. A careful study of the presidential elections dating back to the 1980s, confirms the manipulation of ethnicity and the promotion of politically-motivated violence.



Mama Nyambura was forty years of age at the time we met, a single mother with three children. Her husband abandoned her while pregnant and infected with HIV. Following Kenya's ill-fated presidential elections in December 2008, and the violence that ensued, Mama Nyambura became an 'internally displaced person' (IDP) within her own city. She was identified by others in Mathare as belonging to a specific ethnic group accused of manipulating the election results and stealing Kenya's future. In a makeshift camp of other internally displaced people located on the periphery of Mathare, Nyambura and her children shared a tent with seven other people whom they did not know. We – the Franciscans – were able to help provide some economic as-

sistance to Nyambura, 100 euro (10,000 Kenya Shillings). It was enough to help her rent a small house and begin a small business, the selling of charcoal. These funds, which were given to Nyambura and many others sharing her plight, were provided by Missionszentrale in Germany and by other donors.

The plight of Kenya's urban poor is but one example of the multiple and repeated abuses carried out by Africa's political and economic elite, foreign-born economic actors and multinational corporations who expropriate land and collect rent and other revenues flowing from the abundance of natural resources on the sub-continent: oil in Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea, coltan and diamonds in the Democratic Republic of Congo, timber in Liberia and Cameroon, fertile agricultural lands in Zimbabwe. These are but a sample of the vast riches in



Sub-Saharan Africa that further enrich the coffers of the wealthy and politically powerful – Africa's elite, multinational corporations, individual investors and foreign governments – while depriving Africa's people of their rightful share of the income that is generated illegally and illicitly through the exploitation of these resources.

More than 40% of Africa's people struggle to survive on less than 1 Euro a day (US\$1.25). Between 1961 and 1999, Nigeria's oil production yielded about \$400 billion. Today, more than 92% of the population lives on less than US\$2 a day and more than 70% on less than US\$1 a day (see *Poverty*, *Wikipedia*, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poverty>). In Sudan, oil production has risen to more than 400,000 barrels per day. The

plight of the urban poor in the North and of the people in other regions of the country has not improved in any significant manner since the exploitation and sale of oil has begun. In each of these cases, the development of Africa's natural resources leads to significant human rights abuses, to atrocities and even genocide committed against innocent civilian populations, physical mutilation and the destruction of human lives by the millions. One has only to look to the exploitation of diamonds and coltan in Eastern Congo, the legacy of 'blood diamonds' and timber exploitation in Sierra Leone and Liberia, the expropriation of lands in Unity State and beyond in Sudan, the extrajudicial killings and atrocities committed in the name of oil in Niger Delta and River states and in Equatorial Guinea, to name but a few examples. Illegal resource extraction, the looting of Africa's resources, is closely linked to violent conflict, arms trafficking, human rights violations, humanitarian disasters, forced displacement of large segments of the population, increased incidence of HIV and other life-threatening diseases, the destruction of the natural environment and the collapse of state institutions (see Michael Renner, 2002, *The Anatomy of Resource Wars*, Washington, DC, Worldwatch Institute). Under such conditions, a predatory situation is created whereby the law of the more powerful becomes the order of the day.

Multinational corporations operating in these environments take advantage of the lack of law and regulatory enforcement and further contribute to a general state of lawlessness, which deepens human suffering and environmental degradation. An ecological nightmare can then occur, as it has in the Niger Delta and River states where oil spills and the burning of excess gas from oil wells has poisoned the lands, the rivers and the air. Trailings of mercury and other contaminants used to clean minerals (copper, gold, coltan) enter the local aquifers and watercourses and poison water life, animals and the people who depend on these sources for survival. The situation also contributes to

land degradation and reduced agricultural output for local African farmers. It is now projected that Africa will be able to feed only 25% of its population in 2025 (*United Nations University, Institute for Natural Resources in Africa Report, 2006 – Poverty, Wikipedia, <http://77en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poverty>*). A vicious cycle is created and sustained, further weakening Africa's ability to escape the traps of violence, exploitation, expropriation and extreme poverty.

Certain dimensions of globalization have worsened the plight of Africa's extreme poor. Asian rice, subsidized in part by governments and produced in abundance, is cheaper to purchase in Africa than rice that is produced locally. Genetically modified seeds introduced into African agricultural systems can lead to overdependence on multinational seed companies. These new seed varieties require the use of certain pesticides and fertilizers that degrade the quality and productivity of soils. These same multinational companies are making efforts to patent local life forms such as seed and plant varieties, posing a further threat to biodiversity and the expropriation of the rights of African farmers and nations to have control over their own seeds and food production.

The Bretton Woods institutions (World Bank and the International Monetary Fund), which were created under the pretext of helping to reduce poverty, increase economic output and promote nation building have, according to a number

of respected specialists on African political and economic affairs, done more bad than good for Africa's people. The Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) of the 1980s and 1990s are but one example of the failure of these international institutions to strengthen the response of African nations to the many challenges they face. The rate of extreme poverty in Africa actually increased under the SAPs and other initiatives of the Bretton Woods institutions (1981 – 2001, the rate of extreme poverty increased from 41% to 46%, with 318 million people living in poverty in 2001– see *Poverty, Wikipedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poverty>*). These institutions are not the only cause of the increased number of extremely poor people in Africa, but they have certainly played a role. There is serious concern that the nations of Africa will not significantly achieve the U. N. Millennium Development Goals by 2015. These Goals call for cutting poverty by 50%; increasing educational opportunities for all; reducing infant mortality; improving child and maternal health; combating HIV and other diseases; ensuring environmental sustainability; and creating a global partnership for development.

Africa's resources could provide a significant boost to local and national economies if the management of these resources was carried out with correct oversight, rule of law and with the right types of support from the international community. At this time it appears that Africa's natural resources are both a curse and an enigma for her people and her natural environment.



3. A Reflection on Amazonia and Environmental Justice

Rodrigo de Castro Amédée Peret, OFM

Davi Kopenawa Yanomami is 55 years old. He belongs to one of the oldest peoples on the planet, the Yanomami, a society of hunter-farmers. They live in Amazonia, in an area situated on both sides of the Brazil-Venezuela border. Davi has gained international notoriety in the campaign to guarantee the right of the Yanomami people to a land of their own. In a recent open letter he states: *"You say we are poor and that our life will get better. But what do you know of our life to be able to say it will get better? Because we are different from you and live a different way, because we value things differently, does not mean that we are poor. We Yanomami have other riches left to us by our ancestors, riches you white folk are not able to see: the land which gives us life, the clean water which we drink, our happy children."* (An open letter on development of the Yanomami: February 25, 2008.)

The issue of environmental justice, in regard to Amazonia, highlights how uneven ownership of natural resources is at the core of the social, cultural and environmental problems of the region. This ownership, in recent decades, has been tied to an economic logic which holds that the market can resolve the current environmental crisis. In the quote from Davi just above, we are called to change our perspective: that which we often consider "backward" might better be seen as a chance to build something new. Davi invites us to understand sustainability not only as a consequence of *biological* diversity, but of *ethnic* and *socio-cultural* diversity as well. He invites us to consider the Amazon region in terms beyond the categories of economic rationality, demographic indicators and the market, because these do not reveal all the diversity of the region, or how the people have lived historically on this land.

The Amazonia is an enormous region. It includes parts of Brazil, Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Guiana, Peru, Suriname, French Guiana and Venezuela, and constitutes the largest hydrographic basin in the world. There are 30 million inhabitants in the area. About one third live in rural communities, including various indigenous peoples. The Amazonian forests are blessed with immense biodiversity - between one fourth and one half of all living species on the planet. To give you an idea, there are more plant species in one hectare of land in Middle Amazonia than in all of Europe. Amazonia also contains a large portion of the fresh water available in the world.



In global terms, we can imagine Amazonia as a kind of "air conditioner," in the sense that it carries humidity to the South Central region of Brazil and to other parts of the planet as well. It boasts great mineral wealth: iron, aluminum, nickel, diamonds, gold and uranium, along with its current production of natural gas and oil. It is a rich region, but with poor people and urban areas of concentrated misery.

Amazonia brings together the great contradictions of the Western model of development. Concentrated ownership of natural resources is the source of the social, environmental and cultural problems of the region. Ownership and degrading exploitation of minerals and forests generate land conflict leading to expulsion of the rural population. It impedes access of people to rivers and

forests, forces migration to urban centers and causes increasing economic, social and cultural impoverishment, as well as destruction of biodiversity and increasing emission of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. Mining and prospecting also cause conflict.

Extensive monoculture, cattle production and logging concentrate ownership of land and encourage disputes over natural resources; they also create conditions for unsustainable exploitation of resources, land-grabbing, use of slave labor and deforestation. The construction of dams, ports and roads attracts migrants and promotes a run on land, causing expulsion of families that utilize the land in traditional ways.



One of the central problems of the region is deforestation. In Brazil, 18% of the original Amazonian forest cover has been cut down. Deforestation occurs in the following way: in undeveloped publicly held areas, occupants seek to prove ownership by dividing it into lots. In a first cycle, they are induced to log the trees that are most profitable. They remove the logs without care: in cutting the trees and dragging them through the forest innumerable younger or less profitable ones are destroyed. Tractors pass through the forest creating open spaces. The wood is sold to the lumber industry at minimal prices, but this income is seen as essential to the small landowners. In a second cycle, continuing the progressive degradation of the forest, lumber of lesser value is extracted, and once again the

younger trees are destroyed. In a third cycle the owner burns the remaining trees, provoking fires that are at times of immense proportions. After these fires, pasture grasses are seeded. In the first years productivity is high and the effort is lucrative. With time, the soil is exhausted and productivity declines. It is time to move on to new areas, repeating the cycles. In the logic of this model it is more profitable to open new areas than to recoup the degraded ones.

Besides deforestation, there are other big problems: the process of occupation and dispute over control of the land, the model of development, militarization, drug trafficking, and internationalization, among others. These problems lead to two big confrontations in Amazonia, one over land and the other over rights to social and biological biodiversity.

Diversity is characteristic of Amazonia, whether biological or social. We have already mentioned the rich biodiversity of the region; but its population is diverse as well, made up of rural, traditional and indigenous components. Capitalist investors, however, consider such groups an obstacle because they hinder expansion of the predatory model of development. The United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity reads that the States which are party to the Convention ought to protect and utilize biological resources in accordance with the culture and customs of the local populations. Such an approach recognizes that each culture constructs material and spiritual relations with its ecosystem, and creates wisdom which allows for survival.

Chico Mendes is an example of the violence provoked in the Amazon region. He was murdered in 1988. From the time he was nine years old he worked as a rubber-tapper. His environmental struggle was for creation of areas characterized by self-sustaining economic activities and conservation of nature by the traditional populations. His struggle in Brazil led to creation of



work together with the local people and are concerned with the environment. Various have suffered death threats because of their work for environmental justice, including the bishops Erwin Krautler, Antônio Possamai and Geraldo Verdier. Sister Dorothy Stang was one of the most recent victims, killed on February 12, 2005, because of her work for land reform and the environment. She is an example of the evangelical struggle for environmental justice.

the so-called extractive reserves. These reserves combine a concern for bettering the lives of the local people, with a desire for development and environmental conservation.

Looking at the question of environmental justice, it is the lower income groups that are most exposed to environmental risks and damages. Economic and social inequalities, along with a concentration of the ability to acquire natural resources, are at the base of this injustice. The struggle of Chico Mendes and the rubber-tappers shows that maintenance of social and biological biodiversity depends on strengthening the networks of local populations. They must become "collective subjects" and carry on a political struggle for a development which is centered on people, culture and preservation of nature. The struggle for social and biological biodiversity is therefore part of environmental justice. It is built on promotion of an environment that is ecologically balanced, essential for quality of life and the common good, and on cooperation with other organizations working for social justice. Such cooperation can build resistance and alternatives to the effects of globalized capitalism, like social exclusion and the environmental crisis.

The Catholic Church has been present in Amazonia since the 16th Century. Today it stands in defense of life, justice and peace for the peoples of the region. There are very many lay people, religious, priests and bishops who are involved in pastoral and missionary work in the region. They

The Bishops of Latin America met in Aparecida, Brazil, in May 2007, for their fifth continental meeting (V CELAM). In the final document they reflect on the environment. Chapter 2 deals with *The Reality of Biodiversity, Ecology, Amazonia and Antarctica* (#'s 83-87), and chapter 9 encourages care for the environment which is our common home (#'s 470-473). In #474 the bishops offer a series of proposals and guidelines. They include an evangelization that promotes care for creation, special care for fragile populations threatened by the current model of development, the search for a new model of development and advocacy for public policies that protect and restore nature.

In this spirit, and in faithfulness to the peoples and environment of Amazonia, the Franciscans are in dialogue with one another to reinforce and reinvigorate our presence and mission in Amazonia, a presence which extends back centuries.



4. New Orleans: we have not here a lasting city

Rita M. Hickey, O.S.C.

Saint Paul warns in the Letter to the Ephesians, "We have not here a lasting city." No one who lives in New Orleans or anywhere along the Louisiana Gulf Coast of the USA can doubt the truth of that statement. We have experienced it to be literally true. Paul, of course, was warning his congregation that life has an eternal goal. The attainment of that goal, however, is humanity's work within time and the material world. How we husband both of these resources vitally affects the destiny of all Creation, including humanity, as it strives to reach fulfillment.

Scientists estimate the "Father of Many Waters", as Native Americans respectfully called the great Mississippi River, took six thousand years to create the coast of Louisiana as the first Europeans saw it. Human ignorance and arrogance have taken less than a century to bring it to the brink of destruction.

Over the last seventy-five years decisions,

considered to be "PROGRESS," promising growth, wealth and prosperity for the people of the area have been made. Even granting that some of these promises were made in good faith, they have not been fulfilled for the vast majority of the people of the region and have cost a terrible price.

They produced wealth, but only for the few. They encouraged the maintenance of a cheap labor force sustained by attitudes springing from the poisonous roots of slavery. They have promoted growth which demanded the draining of wetlands teeming with animal and plant life, and the construction of canals and waterways which have become highways of ugliness, pollution and destruction.

An 1878 surveyor's map of the city of New Orleans shows the 200,000 residents of the city clustered in a narrow strip of land around the bend of the Mississippi. This relatively high land is on the natural levee, built by river deposits over centuries of natural, periodic flooding.

Hurricane Katrina slammed into the Gulf Coast early in the morning of August 29, 2005. What followed



were scenes of suffering and destruction that shocked the world. How could such a catastrophe happen in the richest industrialized nation in the world? The answer lies in the decisions, values and attitudes of that nation. The natural ecological balance: land, water, air, plants, animals and people has been sacrificed to so-called progress and economic development.

Comparing that 1878 map with aerial views of the flooded city after Katrina shows the inhabited areas of 1878 correspond almost perfectly to the "sliver by the river", which did not flood in 2005. Almost all of the destructive flooding came in areas left unprotected because of drained wetlands and around man made canals and waterways where man-made levees failed.

The wetlands of the Mississippi Delta provide a natural buffer against incoming storms. There have always been small communities of fishers and hunters in the wetlands. But these people always lived in harmony with their environment. Even before the storms of 2005, they saw their communities and livelihoods beginning to disappear because of commercial and industrial incursions into the wetlands.

Los Isleños

Los Isleños were immigrants from the Canary Islands who came to what is now St. Bernard, Louisiana in the late eighteenth century. They became prosperous farmers and cattle breeders and worked the wetlands and the coastal waters. Living in small, close knit, ecologically balanced communities, they supplied the markets of New Orleans with a bountiful harvest of produce, cattle products, seafood and furs. All this activity demanded the maintenance of healthy wetlands and coastal environment. The Isleños knew and respected this fact.

However, after the Second World War the Port of New Orleans grew rapidly. Shippers, industrial interests, and the government began talking about creating a shorter route to the inner harbor up river. In 1956, over the objections of environmentalists and the people St. Bernard, the construction of the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet ("Mr. Go" as it came to be called) was authorized. From the beginning the local people dubbed it "hurricane highway."

The "Mr. Go" shortened the up river trip by only 37 miles and never attracted the amount of traffic its creators had envisioned. Hurricane Betsy, which struck in September 1965 before it was even officially commissioned, gave the people of St. Bernard proof their fears were true. But Betsy was nothing compared to what was to come in August, 2005.

By 1989 erosion of the wetlands along its banks had widened the Mr. Go from its original 650 foot width to nearly 1500 feet. It served only about one cargo ship a day, and rather than generating revenue, it cost the state on average as much as \$12,000 per vessel.



Isleños took visitors as far as half a mile out into the Gulf to point out where their homes, communities and businesses had once stood. Scientists, engineers and environmentalists warned that, when the next great hurricane hit, the storm surge would be funneled inland up the Mr. Go and estimated this would amplify its strength 20-40%. The Friday before Katrina struck state Senator Walter Boasso warned a US Senate committee hearing that maintaining the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet was, "playing Russian roulette with the lives of my constituents."

Katrina just about wiped St. Bernard off the face of the earth. At the time the population of the parish was about 67,000, and was more ethnically and racially diverse. But the Isleños Community was still at its heart. No one knows exactly how many people were killed by the twenty-five foot storm surge that swept over it. By 2007 the population stood at about 33,000.

The Ninth Ward

Tourism, a major industry in New Orleans, requires a large, cheap workforce. This can be achieved by maintaining a pool of part time workers without benefits. Many residents of the ninth ward worked these low paying, part time service jobs. Others worked in private homes and were often paid off the books. While others had jobs in the health industry which provided benefits, there is one thing that characterizes all these jobs.

They usually require workers to be present during hurricane preparation and even the storms themselves. Workers who do not show up or refuse to remain on the job

risk being fired. It is also true that many low income people cannot afford to evacuate.

Traditionally, the city and state have provided shelters where people could wait out a storm. But in 2005, in order to get people to take the evacuation orders seriously, no such arrangements were made. Only in the final crisis did people find refuge in the Super Dome and the Convention Center, where no provision had been made to receive such large numbers.

Flooding in the ninth ward was largely the result of a breach in the levee along the Industrial Canal caused by an improperly moored barge which broke free during the storm. After the storm there was no place to return to. People were evacuated without even knowing where they might end up. Many still have not been able to return.

Los Isleños and the people of the ninth ward are only a small sample of those whose lives were forever changed by Katrina. But they were not victims of a natural disaster. Los Isleños suffered a terrible economic disaster because of a lack of respect for the ecology of the coastal wetlands, and the people of the ninth ward lost their homes to a barge and saw their relatives and neighbors die because of economic exploitation.

Many efforts are being made to rebuild New Orleans and the Gulf Coast, and this is good. But not enough effort is being put into rebuilding the ecological balance of the area or correcting the social injustices of the past. Our city must learn the lesson soon that the God-given balance of the environment and the dignity of all God's people must be respected and nurtured.



CONCLUSION

The four previous “experiences” of environmental problems are examples of how various Franciscans have taken time to “read the signs of the times” in their own regions of the world. They all demonstrate a deep concern for the human rights and dignity of the people involved, along with a very Franciscan love for mother Earth and all her good gifts. These experiences are an invitation to all of us. In our own corner of the planet we too must take the time to study the reality of the world around us, to know the people involved and their problems, to feel the suffering of the earth and how it is related to the suffering of the people. Possible examples of problems relating to environmental justice might include: energy issues, mining, social and ecological problems related to water, garbage, conflicts over natural resources, toxic waste, landmines, GMOs (genetically modified organisms). And once we uncover these problems, we also need to discover those individuals and organizations that struggle to address these situations, and join with them to promote a better world.

We can begin by discussing in our friaries and in our ministries the following questions:

- What are the principal environmental problems of our region? Who benefits from them?
- How do these problems affect the lives of the people of the region?
- What groups work to address these problems?
- How might we become involved in addressing problems of environmental justice in our region?

