



Homily Suggestions for the Feast of St. Francis

October 4, 2009

27th Sunday in Ordinary Time

The Feast of St. Francis

Focusing on the Scripture: Genesis 2:18-24

Key words and phrases: It's not good for the man to be alone; the man gave names to all the cattle, all the birds of the air, and all wild animals.

Theme: Companionship between human beings and non-human world.

Today's first reading from Genesis is the second creation story that begins with recognition that "it is not good for the man to be alone." Right from the start, our desire for human community, friendship and love is made clear. Through these connections we find wholeness and satisfy our spiritual longing. It is expressed poignantly in the creation of man and woman as two become one flesh. Together, they image God more perfectly. The point is not that God is male or female, but that God is relational. It is true of God; it is true of human beings. We are endowed with an intense, deeply-seated hunger for companionship. And this hunger for human relationship extends even to relationship with non-human creation.

This biblical truth about our innate nature is illustrated by the story of the first human being naming all the animals. When Adam names the animals, he gives them a place in this world and establishes his relationship to them. He knows and recognizes them individually by kinds. In other words, giving names to all non-human creatures is not so much about asserting power over them, but rather it is the sign of our companionship and mutuality.

This sense of companionship resonates with Genesis' first creation story, in which God creates *Adam* – the Hebrew word for "human being" – from *Adamah*, that is, "earth/humus." In Hebrew, no one could say "earth," or "human," without hearing an echo of the other; they are intertwined.

In what ways can this ancient, biblical truth about the nature of relationship between human beings and the rest of non-human creation help us to see grace, and point to our need for conversion in the world today? Here are a few suggestions:

- Cultural values not in keeping with our Christian tradition incline us to view and treat all non-human creation mainly in terms of its utilitarian values. At the same time, thousands of species of plants and animals are being driven to extinction for the sake of a short-term, material gain. The woes of habitat destruction due to deforestation are being compounded by global climate change. According to the government's 2006 Stern review, up to 50% of animal and plant species might face extinction by the end of this century if we fail to significantly reduce our emission of greenhouse gases.

Global climate change is also seriously impacting the most vulnerable people around the world; those who have contributed the least to this problem. For more information on this issue, please visit:

http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/globalpoverty/ccgp_issues_climatechange.shtml and
<http://www.catholiccharitiesusa.org/Page.aspx?pid=1590>

How do we respond to the prospect of our planet being irreversibly impoverished, and integrate our concern for the impoverished people and nations with our concern for the wellbeing of the entire community of life on earth?

- The Holy Father John Paul II, in his encyclical *Centesimus Annus*, attributed the wanton destruction of the earth's diverse creatures and ecosystems to the distortion of the truth about what it means to be a truly human person.

"In his desire to have and to enjoy rather than to be and to grow, man consumes the resources of the earth and his own life in an excessive and disordered way. At the root of the senseless destruction of the natural environment lies an anthropological error, which unfortunately is widespread in our day. ... Man thinks that he can make arbitrary use of the earth, subjecting it without restraint to his will, as though it did not have its own requisites and a prior God-given purpose, which man can indeed develop but must not betray. Instead of carrying out his role as a co-operator with God in the work of creation, man sets himself up in place of God and thus ends up provoking a rebellion on the part of nature, which is more tyrannized than governed by him." (Centesimus Annus # 37)

- John Paul II also challenged us to retrieve a sense of companionship between the human beings and the non-human world. In his World Day of Peace message in 1990, the Holy Father said, "The ecological crisis reveals the urgent moral need for a new solidarity,' adding that, 'respect for life and for the dignity of the human person extends also to the rest of creation."
- St. Francis of Assisi, whose feast is celebrated on October 4th, teaches us how to respect all life. He also offers an alternative vision of what it means to be a truly human person in a deep relationship with God, other human beings and the non-human creation. It is a relationship based on the recognition of the unity of all creatures, on companionship and respect. The Canticum of Creation, composed by St. Francis, conveys his mystical vision. In it, we hear an echo of the harmonious relationship between Adam and all other creatures described in the first pages of the Book of Genesis. The more St. Francis reached out in solidarity to the poor and marginalized, and to non-human creatures – and allowed himself to be touched and transformed by them – the more Christ-like and authentically human Francis became.

How do we act on this biblical truth and follow St. Francis out of the birdbath and into the world on a path of ecological conversion? Three suggestions for our congregations:

1. Reach out beyond your comfort zone. Get to know and name the places where the poor, the voiceless, and God's earth are being exploited. Allow yourself to be touched and transformed by that reality and begin to ask deeper question that get at the root causes of it.
2. St. Francis challenged the exploitative system of his society and promoted a more holistic alternative. Each one of us may need to re-examine some of the cultural values of our own society and make daily choices that are more apt to satisfy our deepest human longings for relationships with other human beings and solidarity with the rest of God's creation. Francis did not hesitate to address himself directly to the rulers of the world to remind them of their responsibility before

God. Could we also be more vocal in advocating for Catholic principles and priorities in climate change discussions and decisions, especially as they impact those who are poor and vulnerable? In fact, Pope Benedict XVI urges us in this direction:

“One of the fields in which it is urgent to work is most definitely that of safeguarding creation.... Before it is too late, we must make courageous choices with a view to a strong alliance between man and the earth....We need a decisive ‘yes’ to care for creation and a strong commitment to reverse those trends that risk making the situation of decay irreversible.”

(Pope Benedict XVI addressing hundreds of thousands of young people in Loreto, Italy)

3. For a wonderful opportunity to act on this urging, visit the following link and take the “St. Francis Pledge.” <http://catholicclimatecovenant.org/the-st-francis-pledge/>