

## **A Reflection on Bishop O’Dowd High School’s Charism: *Kinship With Creation***

A “charism” is a gift of the Holy Spirit and a set of spiritually inspired core values. At O’Dowd, our inclusive charism of “Finding God in All Things” calls us to: *community in diversity, strength of character, academic excellence, kinship with creation, social justice, and joy.*

Each year, school administrators and student leaders strive to enliven, challenge and animate the O’Dowd community with the spirituality and values of our charism. This reflection focuses on our charism call to “kinship with creation.”

### **Introduction**

Finding God in all things calls us to *kinship with creation*. How we treat the environment is a measure of our stewardship, a sign of our respect for the Creator. The earth is an opportunity, uniquely designed in its revelatory power, to facilitate an experience of God’s grace. Pope Francis calls for Catholic communities, including schools, to be leaders in ecological education that converts minds and hearts, facilitates “the leap towards the transcendent which gives ecological ethics its deepest meaning,” and helps our students “to grow in solidarity, responsibility and compassionate care.”<sup>1</sup> Such kinship demands that we invite our students to hear and respond to both the “cry of the earth” and the “cry of the poor.” A look back on the roots of the idea of kinship with creation in Scripture and Tradition helps ground us in that aspect of our charism at a time when dialogue between religion and science is critical to the future of humanity and the earth.

### **Scriptural Foundations<sup>2</sup>**

From the creation stories in the book of Genesis through the nature-based parables of Jesus, references to the environment (and humanity’s relationship with it) run throughout the Bible. We read, for example, that God created as good,<sup>3</sup> loves deeply<sup>4</sup>, and has an ongoing relationship with<sup>5</sup>, the natural world. In turn, creation has a relationship with and praises God<sup>6</sup>. As part of that beloved creation, humanity has a unique relationship with the earth which is inherently connected to a relationship with God<sup>7</sup>. As a result, human (dis)obedience to God’s commandments has consequences for creation.<sup>8</sup> In the New Testament, Jesus is part of<sup>9</sup> and the redeemer of Creation<sup>10</sup>, and the locus of his own spiritual life is often in wild places like deserts and mountains<sup>11</sup>. The earth for Him is an

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<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato Si*, paragraph 210

<sup>2</sup> Scripture has also been misinterpreted and manipulated to justify and perpetuate environmental degradation. Specifically, a focus on the notion of God’s call for humans to “fill the earth and subdue it” (Genesis 1:28) has been cited as one source of the mindset that justifies the use and abuse of the earth for human greed and gain.

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 1:1-2:3, Job 38-41, Job 12:7-10, Psalm 104

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 9:8-17, Psalm 136, John 3:16

<sup>5</sup> Numbers 22:22-39

<sup>6</sup> 1 Chronicles 16:32-33; Psalms 19, 65, 66, 96, 98, 150; Isaiah 55: 12-13; 1 Corinthians 10:26

<sup>7</sup> Genesis 4: 10-11; 1 Kings 4:29-34; Ecclesiastes 3:18-22; Romans 1:20

<sup>8</sup> Deuteronomy 11:13-17; Deuteronomy 28:4,18; Isaiah 24: 1-3; Isaiah 44: 1-5; Hosea 4:1-3

<sup>9</sup> John 1:1-10; John 17:24; Colossians 1:15-17

<sup>10</sup> Mark 16:15; John 12:47; Romans 8:18-23; Ephesians 1:10; Colossians 1:19-20

<sup>11</sup> Mark 1:35; Luke 5:16; Luke 6:12; Luke 9:28; Luke 22:39-41

opportunity, a place of revelation, to facilitate an experience of God. The Creator has been imprinted on creation and is accessible to us as well, when we take time to be in kinship with and stewards of it<sup>12</sup>. Humans are also called to hear creation's "groaning in labor pains" and share in the hope that creation itself would "share in the glorious freedom of the children of God."<sup>13</sup>

### **Church Tradition**

Despite the importance of the earth in Scripture and the spiritual writings of notable Church figures<sup>14</sup>, the institutional Church said little or nothing about environmental stewardship until the Second Vatican Council,<sup>15</sup> which asserted that Christians must "learn the deepest meaning and the value of all creation."<sup>16</sup> Perhaps influenced by scientific research or the social impacts of the environmental crisis, a series of Catholic Social Teaching documents<sup>17</sup> and the most recent three popes have focused on environmental stewardship since Vatican II. Pope John Paul II urged stewardship and fair distribution of the land and its good<sup>18</sup>, and emphasized that "responsibilities... toward nature and the Creator are an essential part of our faith."<sup>19</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, the first pontiff to earn the distinction of a "green pope," warned in his first homily that "the earth's treasures have been made to serve the powers of exploitation and destruction," that a focus should shift to the "needs of sustainable development," and that polluting the environment was a grave sin. The theme of his World Peace Day homily in 2010 was entitled *If You Want to Cultivate Peace, Protect Creation*.

### **Pope Francis and *Laudato Si***

Pope Francis picked up where his predecessors left off, taking the name of the patron saint of the environment<sup>20</sup> and listing the following Church priorities in his opening homily: respecting "each of God's creatures and respecting the environment in which we live"; becoming "protectors of creation, protectors of God's plan inscribed in nature, protectors of one another and of the environment"; and refusing to allow "omens of destruction and death to accompany the advance of this world!" After radically simplifying the traditional papal lifestyle, Pope Francis authored the ground-breaking *Laudato Si*, the first papal encyclical to be focused on the environment and the importance of caring for our

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<sup>12</sup> Exodus 16; Deuteronomy 2:7; Nehemiah 9:20-21; Proverbs 6:6-8; Ezekiel 34; Micah 4; Matthew 6:25-34; Luke 12:6-28; Acts 2:44-45; Acts 4:32-35

<sup>13</sup> Romans 8: 8-13

<sup>14</sup> Since the time of Jesus, a number of notable saints and eco-prophets have emerged in the Christian Tradition. Examples include St. Hildegard of Bingen, several Irish saints (such as St. Brendan, St. Columban, St. Kevin), St. Francis of Assisi, and St. Kateri Tekakwitha.

<sup>15</sup> Though the introduction of earth-conscious language was promising, an anthropocentric worldview persisted in teachings which suggested that humankind "can and should increasingly consolidate its control over creation" because, after all, "all things on earth should be related to man as their center and crown" (*Gaudium et Spes (Church in the Modern World)*, paragraphs 9,12).

<sup>16</sup> *Lumen Gentium (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church)*, paragraph 36

<sup>17</sup> See an extensive list of CST documents related to stewardship at <https://www.cctwincities.org/education-advocacy/catholic-social-teaching/notable-quotations/stewardship-of-creation/>.

<sup>18</sup> 1979 trip to Americas

<sup>19</sup> 1990 World Day of Peace homily: *The Ecological Crisis: A Common Responsibility*

<sup>20</sup> St. Francis of Assisi left a rich legacy of "kinship with creation" through writings like *The Canticle of Creation*), in which he addresses aspects of the natural world as his brothers and sisters.

“common home.” In this letter to the Church, he reminds us that nature is a source of divine revelation, because “each creature reflects something of God and has a message to convey to us,” and God incarnate “is intimately present to each being, surrounding it with his affection and penetrating it with his light.”<sup>21</sup> And with such revelation comes responsibility: the ultimate aim of “kinship with creation” is not for students simply to amass scientific information or satisfy spiritual curiosity, but rather, to discover God in the created world and, in the words of Pope Francis, “to become painfully aware, to dare to turn what is happening to the world into our own personal suffering and thus to discover what each of us can do about it.”<sup>22</sup> Perhaps most importantly, after pointing out that the environmental crises most directly affect those on the margins, Pope Francis develops an *integral ecology* which calls us to respond to both the “cry of the earth” and the “cry of the poor.”

### ***Kinship With Creation at Bishop O’Dowd***

At O’Dowd, kinship with creation manifests as a school-wide effort for sustainability across our campus, curriculum, community, and culture. We aim to equip students, faculty, staff, and the greater community with the tools and experiences to create an environmentally sustainable, socially just, and economically viable world. As an institution, we continually work to reduce our resource consumption and greenhouse gas emissions, and to purchase food, apparel, and other goods as sustainably as possible. Campus infrastructure includes the award-winning Center for Environmental Studies which, equipped with solar panels and a rainwater catchment system, provides an educational model for sustainable design. From a student perspective, kinship with creation may be epitomized by our on-campus “Living Lab,” a four-acre native plant community and sustainable garden. As a platform for experiential, multi-disciplinary learning, the Lab not only engages students with topics such as ecology and food systems, it also provides a peaceful setting for contemplative practice, meditation, and written observation. This experiential space, along with the integration of sustainability throughout the O’Dowd’s curriculum and infrastructure, creates a school culture where all students are invited to be informed, passionate caretakers for the natural world and all its inhabitants.

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<sup>21</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato Si*, paragraph 210

<sup>22</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato Si*, paragraph 217