Nature Contemplation with Third Order Franciscans
Facilitator: David Milliken

The Franciscan tradition centers on the incarnation of God in the world, which leads one to engage with all of Creation with utmost love and respect. Kinship with nature and loving the margins is central to the Franciscan charism, yet contemplative practice can sometimes be overlooked in the active tradition.

My project involved introducing my local Third Order Franciscan fellowship to contemplative exercises and reflections to help us better engage the natural world with intention and embodied joy, humility and love. I held a three-day residential retreat using the Opening the Book of Nature format to introduce some of the fellowship members to nature contemplation and reflection. Following the retreat, the entire fellowship used the Living In An Icon series to navigate three contemplative journeys focused on Waking Up, The Road to Kinship, and Encountering the Burning Bush over a three month period. The participants were introduced to a contemplative theme and materials each week through email and were provided links to supplementary sources (videos, articles) to aid them in their weekly contemplation. Participants could share their weekly experiences asynchronously via email, although most shared during our monthly in-person fellowship meetings. Two noteworthy outcomes of the project involved one participant crediting the experience to improving his struggling marriage and another participant sharing that the experience provided deep comfort and moments of peace during a difficult divorce.

Project Summary
Janet Strickler

Inspired by Jerry Cappel’s article on Deeper Green Church, my project for the Contemplation and Care for Creation class was to organize a parish-wide Lenten theme of Beloved Earth for the Episcopal church where I am a member. The theme included working with the liturgy guild to make more of a focus on nature in the Sunday service, including choices of music and writing prayers, and going through the lectionary for that season to identify natural themes in the assigned scripture readings, which formed the topics for a sermon series. The parish usually does some sort of program and supper on Wednesday nights during Lent, so for that year we held a Beloved Earth Film Festival, and showed 5 widely varied films that had some component of exploring the natural world and our relationship with it. The Sunday School and Youth Group both did small projects that helped the parish be more mindful of the waste we generate; labeling separate bins for compost and landfill for the bathrooms, and making signs to go on the paper towel dispensers with trees drawn by the little kids, and a reminder that the towels are made from trees. As a participatory project, we invited the whole congregation to participate in a “Beloved Earth Photo Project,” by bringing or sending in photos throughout Lent of what they love about Earth, which were displayed on portable art walls at the entrance to the sanctuary. And finally,
to wrap up the season, we chose the readings with natural themes from the options for the Easter Vigil, and made a slide show of over 100 photos that were projected above the altar during the readings, which included the Story of Creation from Genesis, the Story of the Flood, and the Invitation to God’s Abundance from Isaiah 55.

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A Lenten Spiritual Discipline on God’s Creation Five Sundays During Lent at Christ Church with David Greenwald

In Lent, we traditionally adopt a discipline that helps remind us of God's presence and action in our lives. David Greenwald’s project was experiencing God’s creation based on a spiritual program at The University of the South, Contemplation and Creation Care. Participants in the Lenten program experienced God’s creation as spiritual disciplines, such as Wonder and Surprise. This was a hands on class. Throughout the five weeks participants encountered the sacred in nature, interpreted that experience, and reflected together on its implications for their own lives, including practical measures of earth care. We also brought God’s creation into the classroom in the form of flowers, rocks, etc; We watched ‘Biomimicry’ videos, an approach to innovation that seeks sustainable solutions to human challenges by emulating nature’s timetested patterns and strategies. A case study was presented of David’s Coordinator role for the Shore Bird Stewards, who strive to protect the shore bird nests on the beach at Bogue Inlet on North Carolina’s Emerald Isle. This Lenten spiritual discipline was a combined exposure to the theology and the spirituality of creation care and its social implications. It was based on classic monastic spiritual formation and the integral relation of creation to fundamental tenets of the Christian faith.

Project Summary
Mary Foster

The practices we develop in the course of the Contemplation and Care for Creation program are grounded in Christian spirituality, yet they bear a striking resemblance to those of other religious traditions which recognize the deep kinship between human beings and the rest of creation. While reading the popular book *Braiding Sweetgrass* by Robin Wall Kimmerer, I began to notice many connections between her relationship with the land rooted in her practice of Native American spirituality and the Christian practices we develop through *Opening the Book of Nature* and *Living in an Icon*. For my project I wrote an article exploring some of these similarities, and this piece was published in the Spring/Summer 2018 edition of *The Mountain Vision*, a newspaper for Christians for the Mountain. While this article was more of a reflection and summary of my thoughts, I plan to follow up with an in-depth study of the book. Such a study could be helpful for interfaith groups seeking ways to lay a spiritual foundation for engaging environmental issues.
Project Summary
Yolande Gottfried

My project ended up being very simple. I regularly lead wildflower walks, so I decided to try to introduce into the three I was doing that spring some element of nature contemplation. I let the group know ahead of time that, as a sort of experiment, I would pause at some point in the walk for one minute (just that, exactly) of silence and awareness of what was all around us. I emphasized that participation was entirely voluntary (since this had not been publicized as part of the walk). In two out of the three groups, I was pleasantly surprised at how “into it” they got and how they were able to express experiences similar to what we had shared after periods of nature contemplation during the course we were taking.

Contemplative Retreat for Evangelicals
The aim of this project is to develop a combined version of Opening the Book of Nature (OBN) and Living in an Icon (LIAI) that will be accessible to Evangelical and more theologically conservative Christians. It will be augmented with voices and authors familiar to Evangelicals and couched in localized terms and contexts. The point is not to reinvent the rich content contained in these documents but to design it in ways that are familiar to an uninitiated (or even threatened) audience drawing participants into a deeper relationship with both God and God’s creation.

The retreat will take place over a three-day period (Thurs-Sun) and be hosted at an existing conference center. Learnings from this pilot retreat will be evaluated for future retreats.

Mark Purcell
Austin, TX