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...

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 II in 1979 for a reason. {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)} 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 spirituality 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, 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 to the suffering of the entire body. 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 interrelationships 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 Gubbio and the lambs in the Marches. 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 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.

I. A NEW ETHIC FOR A GLOBALIZED WORLD

II.

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.” This citation underlines the urgent need to find principles and structures that are capable of addressing our common problems...

[Many 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.

I. ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

II. 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. These effects include major natural disasters; lack of food security; inadequate access to clean, safe water; and increasing health risks.

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.

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. 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,” 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. 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.

…[omitted] Four experiences and reflections on Environmental Justice

CONCLUSION

...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?