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The World Day of Prayer for Creation, celebrated Sept. 1 by Christians around the world, once again marked the opening of the annual ecumenical liturgical season known as the Season of Creation, which continues until the feast of St. Francis of Assisi on Oct. 4.

The Season of Creation celebrates the generous and awe-inspiring creativity of God and invites us to embrace the mission entrusted to the human family: a mission to celebrate this creation with gratitude, and care for it with reverence and love.

While it is possible to celebrate the Season of Creation liturgically in the Catholic community, there are no specially prepared liturgical prayers or lectionary selections focusing on creation as there are for Advent, Lent, Easter and the other official liturgical seasons. Until we have such resources prepared and established, the basic Christian themes that emerge for the liturgies in this part of the Season of Ordinary Time need to be prayed and reflected on with creative attention to the ecological crises and needs of our times, with help from the themes of Pope Francis' encyclical "*Laudato Si',* on Care for Our Common Home."

For example, within the boundaries of our current liturgical norms, the penitential rite can ask God's mercy for the ways we have become alienated from Earth and viewed this planet as disposable, a source of endless resources, a mere stopping place on the way to heaven.

We can ask Christ's mercy as well for the pollution of air and land and waters, harming the "birds of the air and the flowers of the field" that spoke so vibrantly to Jesus about the loving providence of God. And we can ask mercy of the Spirit at work now raising consciousness and energizing global efforts for the healing and renewal of Earth, our common home.

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The first Sunday of this year's Season of Creation was the 22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time in Year B of the three-year liturgical calendar. In the gospel, Jesus is challenged by scribes and Pharisees because his disciples are eating their meal without washing their hands, disregarding "the tradition of the elders." After condemning their hypocrisy, Jesus summons the crowd and tells them to "listen … and understand. Nothing that enters one from outside can defile that person, but the things that come out from within are what defile."

In *Laudato Si'* Pope Francis quotes the inaugural homily of Pope Benedict XVI in which he said fundamentally the same thing, using imagery from nature to address our ecological crises globally: "The external deserts in the world are growing, because the internal deserts have become so vast."

That focuses attention accurately on the challenging reality that all human-affected climate crises are rooted in attitudes and values: the unrestrained pursuit of wealth, patterns of consumerism and affirmation of accumulation as signs of success and greatness. They flow from the power of human greed, the unquestioning affirmation of constant economic growth on a limited planet, the nurturing of the throwaway culture, self-absorption and disregard of the common good both locally and globally.

The list can go on, but as Pope Francis has insisted so clearly, the ecological crises of our times are spiritual in their roots. They represent a clear summons to profound interior conversion "whereby the effects of our encounter with Jesus Christ become evident in [our] relationship with the world around [us]." What is needed is spirituality powerful enough to motivate significant personal and social change.

Precepts, beliefs and regulations are not enough to bring about the depth of change needed in this context. But we do have basic convictions of faith that can serve as the foundations for developing the type of spirituality that is needed.

In the liturgy's second reading, James reminds us that "All good giving and every perfect gift is from above." All that we are and have are gifts from God. Christian tradition through centuries has affirmed that each creature reflects something of God and has a message for us if we are open to receive it. There is an order and dynamism written into creatures by God that we can grasp and must respect. And we see constantly in the gospels how Christ Jesus embraced this world and loves it to this day.

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These core convictions can serve as a foundation for nurturing and deepening spirituality capable of acknowledging our errors and sins, repenting and motivating a more passionate concern for the protection of our world. The Season of Creation is an ideal time for consciously deepening such a spirituality.

There are many different spiritualities in the Christian community and each has its signature approach to growing spiritually. Each person needs to use the resources of the spirituality from which she or he is most familiar and finds a home. Living and worshiping in a Dominican community setting, let me give an example of how that might be done within the context of a Dominican spirituality.

Dominican tradition identifies four pillars as the essential elements of its charism: contemplation, study, community and preaching. Standing on these pillars, Christians are called to "Praise, Bless, Preach." Together these can suggest a fruitful program for embracing the ecological conversion and deepening an ecological spirituality during this year's Season of Creation and beyond.

Begin with the foundational pillar of **contemplation**. Understood as "a long, loving look at creation," we all can contemplate. What if each person were to commit to taking a few minutes each day to contemplate one bit of creation — a leaf, a squirrel, a cat, a dog, a tree. The possibilities are endless. Let it speak its truth to us, and we be open to being surprised.

I remember an elderly friend one fall, when the trees were in full color, exclaiming, "Isn't it amazing how much beauty goes into dying!" That was 30 years ago and I've never forgotten it. Contemplation of that kind can nurture insight, feed appreciation and inspire love. And what we love, we take care of.

Some of the things we contemplate will stir our curiosity and invite further **study**, the second Dominican pillar. I heard a naturalist recently who had studied the processes of photosynthesis in plants. The more she has learned, the more readily she came to think of plants as doing their amazing work to make her life possible. She readily identified herself as having photosynthesis-envy! And she encouraged us to think of ourselves in relationships of reciprocity with creatures of all other species.

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Like the plants with photosynthesis, they often do for us what we can't do for ourselves. And humans can protect and provide for them in ways they cannot. All creatures are interdependent in the universe we know. The more we come to understand these relationships, the more our minds and hearts will be stretched.

At the advice of a friend, I recently picked up a book called *The Hidden Life of Trees* by Peter Wohlleben. Trees, it turns out, have various ways of communicating with each other and relating to other species above and below ground. They have well-developed defense systems and ways of supporting the sick or weaker members of their "communities." They have clusters of cells in their root systems that compare with the clusters of cells in animal brains that are the seats of their consciousness.

I've just begun the book, but it has already exploded my assumptions about trees and blown open my imagination!

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The foundational pillars of daily **contemplation** and **study** feed appreciation, love and praise.

The third pillar of Dominican spirituality is **community**. When we're amazed by the beauty of a leaf or a deer, the amazing processes of photosynthesis by which plants make human and animal life possible, or the mysterious patterns and activities of conscious life in trees, we talk about them in our communities. Stories and wisdom are shared. Appreciation and loving care for creatures grow and spread. Communities work together to develop different patterns of living and promote social change.

This is essential: our ecological crises cannot be addressed successfully by individual actions alone. As Pope Francis stated clearly in *Laudato Si*', "The ecological conversion needed to bring about lasting change is also a community conversion."

Finally, the process of communicating with other individuals and communities to call for patterns of living that are more caring and responsive to God's intent written in creation is precisely the ecological **preaching** essential to the survival and wellbeing of our common home.

Contemplation, study, community and preaching expressed in praise, being a blessing in the ways we live and care for creation and preaching with word and with our lives in today's world — this is one possible approach to deepening ecological spirituality during this Season of Creation.

Whatever spiritual tradition we draw on to nourish a deeper ecological conversion in the weeks ahead, it will be fruitful to the degree that it expands our loving awareness of God in creation, deepens our response of gratitude and care, and nurtures our awareness of interdependence and communion with every other creature in the truly awesome mystery of creation.

A happy, blessed and spirit-expanding Season of Creation!

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