News
EarthBeat



Franciscan Brothers Jacek Orzechowski, Michael Perry and Jimmy Kernan, who work at the Laudato Si' Center for Integral Ecology at Siena College in Loudonville, N.Y., are pictured in an undated photo.
(OSV News/courtesy Siena College)

Gina Christian

View Author Profile

OSV News

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

LOUDONVILLE, N.Y. — September 26, 2024
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

A Franciscan college in New York state will host a two-day gathering on integral ecology and sustainability with a focus on creating a "global vision with local meaning" to care for creation.

"Earth's Cry, Humanity's Call: A Symposium on Integral Ecology" will take place Oct. 10-11 at Siena College in Loudonville, bringing together academics, policy experts and students.

United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres, who has consistently highlighted the need to address environmental issues, will deliver the symposium's keynote address on "Global Perspectives on the Climate Crisis and Urgency to Act Now."

The free symposium, set to take place both in person and online, will also include several panel discussions, exhibitor displays, prayer and a concluding performance of short plays about climate change, sustainability and climate justice, several of them written and performed by Siena students.

Franciscan Brother Michael Perry, director of the new Laudato Si' Center for Integral Ecology at Siena, told OSV News the idea for the symposium emerged about a year and a half ago during a conversation with fellow Franciscans on the impact of conflicts, particularly Russia's war in Ukraine.

"We thought about organizing a conference to draw attention to it, to have some speakers come in and give us some complexity and background, and then from a Catholic social teaching perspective, (suggest) how we could bring our faith to promoting peace and the healing of the region," he said. "And the longer we talked, the more we realized that the whole question of the issues of peace and war were connected to much larger narratives."

As he and his Franciscan brothers further pondered the current struggles faced throughout the world, "one of the commonalities that emerged was what's happening to the environment and the impact it's having on people's lives," said

Perry, pointing to "the consequences of violence on the natural environment."

Ultimately, he said, "we ended up moving toward this idea of doing a conference that would be as global as possible but also as local in terms of meaning … focusing on what's going on with the environment, what is our faith informs us about God's intention for the world, and our place in it and the place of all of creation in giving glory to God."

From the perspective of Franciscan tradition, the symposium has been eight centuries in the making, said Perry.

"This is not a new voice for us," he said, pointing to the upcoming 800th anniversary of St. Francis of Assisi's "Canticle of the Sun" in 2025, which reflected the saint's own understanding of "nature's place within God's plan."

Perry also said that Pope Francis, as well as St. John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI, have all "helped bring a sharper focus and for us to understand the centrality of our relationship with everything.

"The way we treat other things, the way we treat human beings — we see the consequences of that when we don't treat each other well," he said. "And the consequences are manifest everywhere."

Perry also told OSV News he and his team plan to expand the symposium and its aims to other Franciscan colleges and universities in the U.S., as well as at centers in Brazil, Colombia, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Vietnam.

Advertisement

Franciscan Brother Jacek Orzechowski, associate director of Siena's Laudato Si' Center, told OSV News that "the sense of the great urgency of the moment" regarding environmental concerns fuels his passion for the project.

Having served in various countries, "I've been to some other places where the gravity and urgency (of the issue) is in your face," he said. "Unless we begin to tackle the issue of climate change, the problems will be hugely magnified. We're talking about up to 1 billion (climate) refugees over the next 30 years."

Orzechowski said the symposium looks to "empower students to action," providing "a venue for young people to be involved" and to heed "the call of the church to evangelize in a way to this ecological conversion that Pope St. John Paul II, Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis have talked about."

"The path of conversion (is) to do (this work) together, and … to address it with a sense of hope that we are not alone, but this is God's work of healing the earth and transforming, building God's kingdom," he said.

And that kingdom is also hiring, as the move to sustainability creates new industries and employment opportunities, said Franciscan Brother Jimmy Kernan, currently teaching at Siena amid finishing his master's degree in molecular engineering.

"Some Siena alumni who work in the solar energy field locally are going to come and share about what are job opportunities and different ways to get involved are there," he said.

Those options are diverse, and not simply limited to scientific and technical positions, Kernan added.

"They also need accountants, they need people in PR, they need communicators, they need graphic artists," he said. "One of the great aims of the symposium, one of the first events that we're holding, is an opportunity for students and people who are going to be attending in person to meet with a bunch of different organizations who work on this stuff … including employers in the field."

Emily Atassi — a Siena senior and president of the school's student senate — will moderate a panel discussion at the symposium on "Thinking Globally, Acting Locally," and she told OSV News that she's already implementing that aim on campus.

"This fall we're really trying to push for a recycling signage project (throughout) campus" to encourage accurate, consistent recycling among students, she said.

The school's student senate has a campus sustainability committee, which has several projects under discussion, Atassi said.

Having spent her childhood summers on the beach, Atassi said ocean conservation in particular is "deeply important" to her.

"And I want my children and the next generation to continue to enjoy those aspects of nature as well," she said.

The commitment is also a spiritual one for her and for many fellow students, said Atassi, who received her sacraments while attending Siena.

"I think as students, a lot of times, especially when coming to a Franciscan college or if you're discovering your faith in college like I did … you're sometimes confused with how to connect with God," Atassi said. "We wonder, 'Do I like group prayer? Do I like praying by myself?' So I think that being a steward of creation is a way to connect with God. And this can be a way for students to be more in tune with their faith or grow in their faith or even start their faith journey at Siena."