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Pope Francis a 'Franciscan Jesuit' when it comes to environment

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Eco Catholic

While most of us are biding our time, waiting to see how Pope Francis tackles the toughest issues in the church -- the role of women; issues facing the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community; reform of the Curia; dealing with the sex abuse cover-up -- there seems little doubt that Francis will be an environmental pope.

After all, St. Francis of Assisi is one of the most popular saints of all time, partly because he is often pictured with birds and deer and other wildlife. In 1979, Pope John Paul II declared him the patron saint of ecologists. The Catholic Climate Covenant features the St. Francis Pledge for those who want a formal commitment to care for Planet Earth.

But what will Pope Francis actually do to move the environmental agenda for our planet? Well, he made Planet Earth a key part of his message at his March 19 inaugural Mass: "I would like to ask all those who have positions of responsibility in economic, political and social life, and all men and women of goodwill: Let us be protectors of creation, protectors of God's plan inscribed in nature, protectors of one another and of the environment."

But there's a history here. The environmental message in his inaugural homily echoed the final document of the Fifth General Conference of the Council of Latin American Bishops in Aparecida, Brazil, in 2007. Pope Francis, who was then Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio, chaired the committee that drew up the final recommendations.

That document offers far more than platitudes. It criticizes extractive industries and agribusiness for failing to respect the economic, social and environmental rights of local communities, especially

indigenous people. It praises the region's rich flora and fauna, calling for the preservation of the Amazon rainforest as part of "the inheritance we received, for free, to protect."

Also promising is the testimony of Luis Scozzina, a priest who is the director of the Franciscan Centre of Studies and Regional Development at the Pontifical Catholic University of Argentina. In an interview with Inter Press Services, he said "protecting creation" is one of the central focuses of Franciscans, and Bergoglio is "the most Franciscan Jesuit we have ever known."

"Francis will put the ecological crisis high up on the agenda," Scozzina continued. He also noted that the poor, people special to Pope Francis, are hurt most grievously by environmental degradation.

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