

Head of new Earth Corps program hopes to emphasize Franciscan spirituality

Sharon Abercrombie | May. 16, 2013 Eco Catholic

As Milwaukee Franciscan Sr. Jose Hobday moved about the country presenting her retreats, the only items in her traveling wardrobe were two dresses and a sewing kit.

Hobday, who was part Seneca and Iroquois, called upon her Native American roots and its storytelling tradition to live simply and teach about prayer and spirituality. Simple living is "about choosing time for people and ideas and self-growth rather than for maintenance and guarding and possessing and cleaning," she wrote in her book, *Simple Living*.

During the 1980s and '90s, Hobday was a faculty member at Matthew Fox's Institute in Culture and Creation Spirituality at Holy Names University in Oakland, Calif. I thought of this great lady a few weeks ago during a phone conversation with Rhett Engelking, a secular Franciscan. Hobday and Engelking are of different generations, but their hearts are beautifully connected by the call of simplicity. It remains an unbroken green thread within the Franciscan charism.

Next month, Engelking leaves Milwaukee and his position as a group therapist and leadership development coordinator at Rogers Memorial Hospital to be the program manager of the Franciscan Action Network's new [Earth Corps](#) [1] project at the network's headquarters in Washington, D.C.

Earth Corps is designed for young adults ages 18 to 35 who feel called to work at the grass-roots level on environmental, immigration and poverty issues within their parish settings. The project promotes simple and just living at community and personal levels.

"The big thing we are hoping to do is to bring about a transformative experience for young adults," Engelking said. "They have all the information they need on all of these social and environmental justice issues, but they don't know what to do with it."

His training programs will emphasize St. Francis of Assisi's philosophy of simplicity and offer practical tools for change at the local level. The courses also will study Franciscan Sr. Ilia Delio and Franciscan Br. Keith Warner's book, [Care for Creation: A Franciscan Spirituality of the Earth](#) [2].

The experiential level of the program will have people "digging in the dirt together, learning to see everything as sacred, and cultivating our universal sense of belonging," Engelking said. "It will stress moving from the 'egonomics' of greed into a truly compassionate economics directed toward the well-being of the entire planet."

Engelking is currently a member of the Casey Sister-Brotherhood, Inc., in Milwaukee, where three members live simple lifestyles built around simplicity and sustainability, spirituality, social justice and community. One of the members is a nurse, and the other works as an advocate for a disability rights organization. The Casey Sister-Brotherhood -- named after U.S.-born Capuchin Fr. Solanus Casey, declared "venerable" by Pope John Paul II in 1995 -- also has four auxiliary members who do not live in community but attend events regularly.

The group tries to use alternative forms of transportation, including the bus or carpooling, and they minimize personal expenditures in line with simple and sustainable living. Some also work in the St. Francis Community Garden attached to St. Francis of Assisi Parish in Milwaukee.

The garden, implemented by Sister-Brotherhood member Mary Pimmel-Freeman, fosters community building among neighborhood residents and parishioners and includes space for a soup kitchen and a peace group.

Besides his involvement at the Casey Sister-Brotherhood, Engelking recently joined with members of the Franciscan Action Network in a public advocacy action in downtown Milwaukee. They protested against the existing ideology of corporate personhood, a privileged status allowing companies unlimited freedom, he explained.

"If corporations didn't have sway to do what they please to the environment, the BP oil spill wouldn't have happened," he said. "But if a couple of my buddies and I were to dump a barrel of oil into the Gulf of Mexico, we'd be arrested."

Engelking said he plans to begin training programs for new Earth Corps chapters in the fall. Groups are already forming in Albany, Syracuse and Long Island, N.Y.; Silver Springs, Md.; Tampa, Fla.; and Milwaukee.

As he moves forward at the Franciscan Action Network, Engelking will have the words of Franciscan writer Richard Rohr for inspiration. Last winter, Rohr, director of the Center for Action and Contemplation in Albuquerque, N.M., spoke at a small organizational meeting in D.C. for 30 new Earth Corps members, including 13 young adults, four secular Franciscans and two friars.

The Franciscan Earth Corps is an excellent path, Rohr said then, "because it is Franciscan, it's little and it's local. Locality is where religion becomes personal, relational, accountable and real, instead of this high-level anonymous thing that most of us grew up with."

Rohr advised the D.C. Earth Corps members to "not waste time in negative energy, proving another group is wrong, doesn't belong or is not worthy. Instead, become a para-church phenomena; you don't get antagonistic. ... (Instead) like Francis, you go to the side and do it better. Do it with a different set of emphases, never forgetting that the entire word is sacramental."

Meanwhile, the faithful must play a strong role inside Washington politics, Rohr said, "or else we're going to fade into total insignificance. If the Gospel has nothing to say to the system, to purify it, clarify it, focus it, broaden it, then how can you call Jesus the savior of the world, as John 4:42 does? Is he the savior of the world or just the savior of little elite groups here and there? If you get the transformational grace of the Gospel Jesus, your politics has to change. The way you use your money will be reassessed."

Sr. Jose Hobday knew all about that.

**An earlier version of this story gave the wrong name of Engelking's organization. It has also been revised to clarify the purpose and makeup of the Casey Sister-Brotherhood.*

For information on becoming an Earth Corps member, email Engelking at engelking@franciscanaction.org [3].

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Links:

[1] <https://franciscanaction.org/earthcorps>

[2] <http://www.amazon.com/Care-Creation-Franciscan-Spirituality-Earth/dp/0867168382>

[3] <mailto:engelking@franciscanaction.org>