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Young adults look to emulate St. Francis' bond with nature

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SYRACUSE, N.Y.

On a recent Saturday, members of the local Franciscan Earth Corps stocked shelves and cleaned storage rooms at a food pantry. In early March, the group will screen ?Triple Divide,? a documentary about hydraulic fracturing, or fracking. Later this spring, they'll put up bluebird boxes at a retreat center.

And once a month, they'll gather to talk about Franciscan spirituality.

The Syracuse group is among 10 Franciscan Earth Corps chapters started last year. At least six more groups are organizing as part of a push by the Franciscan Action Network, a social justice group that aims to transform the world in the spirit of St. Francis of Assisi.

The national, ecumenical program encourages young adults, aged 18 to 35, to connect social and environmental justice activities with Franciscan teachings that stress the interconnectedness of creation.

?Without religion and spirituality, all you're doing is reordering everything on the outside and not affecting anyone on the inside," said Rhett Engelking, who directs the corps through the Washington, D.C.-based Franciscan network.

Jess Saville, a doctoral candidate at Syracuse's State University of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry, understands the connection.

As she stacked cans of food, she described how her research on phytoremediation -- using plants to restore contaminated soil -- reflects a core Franciscan understanding of the interconnectedness of nature.

?We're dependent on the plants to clean up nature,? she said.

Franciscan Earth Corps stresses prayer, service and creation stewardship. Those elements echo the philosophy of the 13th-century saint who said: ?We are all creatures of one family.? Projects emphasize care for the Earth and the Franciscan ideals of simplicity and sustainability.

Also guiding the corps is St. Francis' poem, ?Canticle of the Sun,? which describes Sister Moon and Brother Wind, ?and every kind of weather through which you give sustenance to your creatures.?

St. Francis, named by Pope John Paul II as patron saint of ecology, is the model corps groups look to as they try to rebuild the brokenness of the church and the world. It's the message Francis is said to have received from Jesus in 1205 while praying at the run-down Church of San Damiano near Assisi, Italy.

Kelly Moltzen, a registered dietician who belongs to the Bronx chapter, is concerned about the food system's effect on the environment.

?Livestock production creates 18 percent of greenhouse gas emissions," she said. ?Eating more fruits and vegetables that are naturally made will make us healthier and the environment more healthy.?

Her chapter recently built a greenhouse and screened ?A Place at the Table,? a documentary about hunger. The group is considering creating a church garden or food-share program to supply fresh produce.

Moltzen works to improve nutrition and access to healthful food for a poor community susceptible to obesity and diabetes.

?I'd like to get more of the churches involved in getting healthy food,? she said. ?That's the 'repair the house' concept.?

Franciscan spirituality stresses the sacred web of life, said Franciscan Sr. Caryn Crook, a trained biologist who works with the Syracuse chapter.

?We learn so much about our Creator by being in creation and through studying an ecosystem,? she said. ?Everything works together to create one -- mutuality, cooperation, sacrifice. We can emulate this relationship.?

Engelking, the corps project manager, hopes to move the conversation ?beyond the bird bath? image of St. Francis.

?We see Francis as more than this quaint and harmless icon of being nice to animals,? he said. ?He's someone who wants to live in right relationship with creation."

Pope Francis, the saint's namesake, has recently appealed for the protection of the environment and the care for the weakest members of society.

Franciscan spirituality, Engelking said, requires a shift from egocentrism to eco-centrism.

?Instead of thinking about me and my needs, I am looking outwards to my relationship with the world," he said.

In addition to the Syracuse chapter, Franciscan Earth Corps chapters exist in Albany, N.Y.; Long Island, N.Y.; Silver Spring, Md.; Tampa, Fla.; Milwaukee; Charlottesville, Va.; and Little Rock, Ark.

Fr. Sam Fuller, a Capuchin Franciscan ministering in a parish in Middletown, Conn., is helping launch a chapter in the greater Hartford, Conn., area. He and other Franciscans put together an Earth Day march addressing climate change; a similar event is planned for April 27. The Hartford chapter will present ?Melting Ice, Mending Creation: A Catholic Approach to Climate Change,? a program created by the Catholic Coalition on Climate Change, next month.

?It's not so much debating the science or the politics,? Fuller said. ?The wisdom of the Earth is so much deeper than the politics. St. Francis calls us deeper to discover God's love in oneself and in creation.?

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