

## Franciscanism: A Framework Sustainable Development Education

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### Introduction:

The fourth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) is 'Quality Education', with its objective being to 'ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong educational opportunities for all'. The targets within this goal cover such issues as access to and support of pre-school through secondary school education, achieving gender equality in education, and improving the quality of education facilities. But the target that I wish to focus on is 4.7, which states:

"By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development."

Embedded in this target is the unspoken assumption that 'all learners' will, through their education, acquire a set of values that can be said to underlie all seventeen SDGs – those that will lead to the creation of a greener, safer, more equitable and overall 'better' world. This, in turn, requires a different way of thinking, or, if you will, a different kind of consciousness.

So it is reasonable to conclude that consciousness and values are very much integral to the education of sustainable development. Consciousness and values also contain elements of spirituality, or the way in which an individual sees himself as fitting in with an 'other' that is greater than himself. Indeed, in Pope Francis' *Laudato Si's* Chapter Six is entitled 'Ecological Education and Spirituality', in which the close links between a 'different way of thinking' and a sustainability-focused education – the confluence of consciousness and values - are described; titles of the sub-chapters include 'Towards a New Lifestyle' and 'Educating for the Covenant Between Humanity and the Environment'.

The messages in *Laudato Si* are based on the philosophy and teachings of St. Francis of Assisi, the patron saint of the environment. These Franciscan Values can be said to transcend religion and, in many respects, align well the overarching objectives of the SDGs. That they also can be used as a foundation for imbuing education for sustainable development with consciousness and values is a logical assumption. The purpose of this short essay, then, is to explore how the core elements of Franciscanism and the lessons found in *Laudato Si* can be combined as an effective means to combine consciousness and values in the education of sustainable development, using as an example an institution of higher learning - St. Francis College in Brooklyn, New York, at which the teaching of Franciscan Values is a core element of its mission - is building a sustainable development-oriented curriculum.

### Mission of St. Francis College

The mission of St. Francis College, as stated on its website ([www.sfc.edu](http://www.sfc.edu)), reads in part:

“St. Francis College is a private, independent, co-educational, urban college whose Franciscan and Catholic traditions underpin its commitment to academic excellence, spiritual and moral values, physical fitness, social responsibility, and life-long learning. We educate the whole person for a full, relational life, developing the students’ talents and abilities to form confident alumni well prepared for graduate study, for meaningful, fulfilling careers, as well as for collaborative, service-oriented leadership.....”

Specifically, our students experience a strong liberal arts core curriculum integrated with pre-professional programs in a wide range of disciplines, designed to prepare them for the rigors of an increasingly technological and globalized marketplace and society. Excellence of instruction, small classes and professors’ individual attention to each student create a hospitable community atmosphere, based on trust and mutual respect. These foster the development of critical thinking, moral choices, responsible citizenship and personal commitment to social justice and the environment.”

Included with the Mission Statement are four specific goals prefaced by the phrase “recognizing the original Franciscan understanding of hospitality as a challenging, risk-taking social contract, we strive for gradient and appreciable success in achieving...”:

- Goal 1 – Promoting academic excellence;
- Goal 2 – Advancing a thriving intellectual community;
- Goal 3 – Supporting student life and the development of the whole person, and;
- Goal 4 – Enabling the transition from student to citizen of the world.

Two elements within Goal 3 are worth highlighting: the desire to enable “the smooth transition of our local, national and global student body into the college community and city”, and “promoting holistic wellness to develop both leadership and fellowship.”

One can easily see how St. Francis College’s mission and goals map well to the objectives of SDG 4, and I suppose a similar argument could be made for the mission statements and goals of many, many other institutions of higher learning. But what I believe separates St. Francis College from others is its adherence to the Franciscan values of compassion, ethical behavior, fellowship, hospitality and service, and that it hopes to imbue its students with those values. Any student who graduates from St. Francis College should be aware that what they think, say and do matters to themselves and the broader community in which they live, and that they have an obligation to help make the world in which they live a little better.

### **Imparting Franciscan Values**

So how is that done? How does someone teach something that easily can be described as ineffable or part of the spirit? Well, the short answer is that it cannot be taught. Sure, it is possible to teach about the life of St. Francis of Assisi, study his teachings, examine the work of his followers, but those things by themselves do not make one a Franciscan. And, really, there is no such things as ‘Franciscan Biology’, ‘Franciscan Chemistry’, ‘Franciscan Management’, ‘Franciscan Nursing’, ‘Franciscan Psychology’ or ‘Franciscan Sociology’. Franciscan values are easier to demonstrate, and while that mostly can be done through words and actions, I think there is a way to do that in the classroom using ‘care for creation’ as a basic theme. For if St. Francis is known for anything, it is that he held creation – this Earth – sacred, and saw the care

for that Earth as the most important task humans could do. Focusing on care for creation, I believe, provides an opportunity to discuss not only where students fit with the rest of creation, but also how what the students are studying also fits with the rest of creation. In this way, students can start seeing how they are connected to something much bigger than themselves, and how what they are studying also is connected to something bigger. It is through seeing these connections that the ideas of the “development of the whole person” and the “transition to a citizen of the world” can be realized.

## Teaching Connections

Now, drawing connections within specific disciplines is something educators do all the time and is essential, really, for a student to be able to master a discipline. So, when I say ‘teaching connections’, I really am talking about taking an interdisciplinary approach to education. This, however, is something educators do not do particularly well or are trained for; too much teaching is done in what are called ‘silos’, or self-contained approaches. How, then, can using a care for creation theme help with interdisciplinary thinking? For an answer let us turn to Pope Francis’ 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si’: On Care for Our Common Home*, in which ‘the interconnectedness of things’ is a common theme.<sup>1</sup> What, then, does *Laudato Si’* say about education?

### ***Laudato Si’* and Education:**

First and foremost, one should remember that an encyclical is a teaching document, a guide, in this instance, for any person regardless of faith to understand what care for creation is and means. What follows are various excerpts from the *Laudato Si’* that touch on education<sup>2</sup>.

From Page 84:

There needs to be a distinctive way of looking at things, a way of thinking, policies, an **educational** program, a lifestyle and a spirituality which together generate resistance to the assault of the technocratic paradigm.<sup>3</sup>

From Page 149, the first page of Chapter Six – Ecological Education and Spirituality:

“Many things have to change course, but it is we human beings above all who need to change. We lack an awareness of our common origin, of our mutual belonging, and of a future to be shared with everyone. This basic awareness would enable the development of new convictions, attitudes and forms of life. A great cultural, spiritual and **educational** challenge stands

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<sup>1</sup> The word ‘connected’ appears many times in *Laudato Si’*. The following two passages are representative of the importance Pope Francis places on connections. “Everything is connected. Concern for the environment thus needs to be joined to a sincere love for our fellow human beings and an unwavering commitment to resolving the problems of society. (p. 67) And “To seek only a technical remedy to each environmental problem which comes up is to separate what is in reality interconnected and to mask the true and deepest problems of the global system.” (p. 84)

<sup>2</sup> The words ‘education’, ‘educational’ or ‘educators’ have been bolded for emphasis.

<sup>3</sup> What Pope Francis means by ‘the assault of the technocratic paradigm’ is that technocratic thinking, or relying too much on technology to address problems, has resulted in over specialization, which makes it hard to see the larger picture.’

before us, and it will demand that we set out on the long path of renewal.”

From Page 153 – 154:

“Environmental **education** has broadened its goals. Whereas in the beginning it was mainly centered on scientific information, consciousness-raising and the prevention of environmental risks, it tends now to include a critique of the “myths” of a modernity grounded in a utilitarian mindset (individualism, unlimited progress, competition, consumerism, the unregulated market). It seeks also to restore the various levels of ecological equilibrium, establishing harmony within ourselves, with others, with nature and other living creatures, and with God. Environmental **education** should facilitate making the leap towards the transcendent which gives ecological ethics its deepest meaning. It needs **educators** capable of developing an ethics of ecology, and helping people, through effective pedagogy, to grow in solidarity, responsibility and compassionate care.”

“Yet this **education**, aimed at creating an “ecological citizenship”, is at times limited to providing information, and fails to instill good habits.”

From Page 155:

“**Education** in environmental responsibility can encourage ways of acting which directly and significantly affect the world around us, such as avoiding the use of plastic and paper, reducing water consumption, separating refuse, cooking only what can reasonably be consumed, showing care for other living beings, using public transport or car-pooling, planting trees, turning off unnecessary lights, or any number of other practices. All of these reflect a generous and worthy creativity which brings out the best in human beings.”

From Page 157:

“Our efforts at **education** will be inadequate and ineffectual unless we strive to promote a new way of thinking about human beings, life, society and our relationship with nature. Otherwise, the paradigm of consumerism will continue to advance, with the help of the media and the highly effective workings of the market.”

A few things are worth noting from these passages. First, there is a strong call for ‘a new way of looking at things’ which combines not only education but lifestyles, spirituality and, even, technology, and that no one of these should be given preference over the other. Second, education must take a much more holistic view of things, recognizing, in effect, the connectedness of things. Third, there are strong parallels between the role of education in the encyclical and the goals for education as outlined in SDG 4. And fourth, if one wanted to find an outline around which to design a ‘Franciscan-themed’ education, starting with *Laudato Si* would not be a bad place to start. Indeed, that essentially is what lies behind St. Francis College’s approach to an education that imbues Franciscan values, particularly with respect to care for creation.

### **St. Francis College’s Approach to Sustainability Education**

Sustainability education at St. Francis College is a work in progress, but is being built around the underlying concept that it should be interdisciplinary. Several years ago an Environmental Studies Minor was created using courses that already existed. A student pursuing the minor first selects either:

BIO 1000, Ecology and the Environment, or  
SCI 1301, Environmental Science,

Then choose two from:

BUS 1204 (Business and Society)  
BUS 5401 (Sustainable Development)  
ECO 3307 (Environmental Economics)  
PHI 3344 (Environmental Ethics), or  
REL 5309 (The Environmental Crisis and the World's Religions)

And then two from among:

BIO 1102 (Contemporary Biology, Marine Biology)  
BIO 2204 (Ecology)  
CHE 1000 (Chemistry in Society)  
CHE 1101 (Chemistry and Life)  
CHE 5001 (Understanding our Environment)  
ECO 2302 (Economic Issues Today)

The only courses that have prerequisites are the ECO courses (macroeconomics) and Chemistry and Life (beginning math) and Ecology (general biology). The 5000-level courses are courses in the Honors program and technically are open to only Honors students, however other interested students can get permission to enroll. These courses, however, are in the process of being converted to non-Honors courses.

While these courses represent different disciplines, more could be represented. For example, it would be good if disciplines such as Political Science, Psychology and Sociology could be added. Adding courses in this minor from those disciplines, however, requires interest among the faculty within those disciplines to create courses with an environmental topic in them, and, of course, Departmental Chair support. Obstacles to that creation and support include where the new course would fit within the major itself, faculty receiving permission to teach the course on a regular basis, and student interest, which is dependent on them seeing that the course adds value to the body of knowledge in the discipline they are creating for themselves. These are not easy obstacles to overcome.

Instead of confining education to environmental issues, an alternative is to examine how sustainability-related issues can be incorporated into the St. Francis College curriculum. The first attempt to do this was to consider joining Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME). This was done on a provisional basis, however PRME turned out to not be a good fit for the College. First, as a small (2600 student) primarily undergraduate institution, many of the responsibilities associated with PRME membership (reporting, participation in conferences, etc.) were difficult to fulfill. Second, its focus on management education was not consistent with a desire to look at sustainability across many disciplines.

A better choice for the College, however, turned out to be joining the United Nations Sustainability Solutions Network (UNSDSN), which gives it access to the UNSDSN's educational arm, SDSN.edu (now the SDG Academy). The number of courses available through SDSN.edu, primarily through online delivery, has been increasing constantly, and currently include:

Sustainable Cities  
Climate Action: Solutions for a Changing Planet  
One Planet/One Ocean  
The Age of Sustainable Development  
Planetary Boundaries/Human Opportunities  
Climate Change Science and Negotiation  
Transforming Our World: Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals  
Laudato Si  
The Best Start in Life: Early Childhood Development for Sustainable Development  
Human Rights & Wrongs: Challenging Poverty, Vulnerability and Social Exclusion  
Feeding a Hungry Planet: Agriculture, Nutrition and a Sustainable Planet  
Natural Resources For Sustainable Development

These courses are designed for online delivery, and as such it is possible to incorporate them into other courses as supplements. For example, One Planet/One Ocean could fit into a Marine Biology course, Feeding a Hungry Planet could fit into a course on nutrition (Nursing), or The Best Start in Life could fit into a course on childhood development (Psychology). How these courses can be used really is up to the imagination and motivation of the instructor.

To help facilitate the incorporation of content from the SDG Academy into existing courses, a special group of faculty volunteers has been formed who have agreed in principle to determine how to include sustainable issues in their courses. These faculty come from such disciplines as Biology, Chemistry, Education, English, History, International Studies, Management, Psychology, Religion and Sociology. In addition, significant efforts are being made to involve student clubs to help disseminate information about the SDGs across the student body and demonstrate what students can do to help support the SDGs. Also, faculty, administration and students are being encouraged to develop strategies for community outreach to talk about sustainability to a variety of constituents, from local businesses, to community groups and to schools. That what makes St. Francis College unique – its Franciscan spirit – will be an integral part of all those activities.

## References

Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si'* of the Holy Father Francis on Care for Our Common Home, May 2015.

SDG Academy, <https://courses.sdgacademy.org>

St. Francis College website, <https://www.sfc.edu/about/historymission>

St. Francis College 2016/2018 Course Catalog