

What do Francis of Assisi and Francis of Buenos Aires Have In Common? A Franciscan Perspective on the Common Good

A lecture by Fr. Michael Perry

January 30, 2018

Emerson Auditorium in Knight Hall at Washington University in St. Louis

Marie Griffith, Director of the John C. Danforth Center on Religion and Politics

Good evening everyone. We know there are a couple of other things you could be doing right now, so we're very very glad to see you here. On behalf of the John C. Danforth Center on Religion and Politics at Washington University in St. Louis, it is an exceptional honor this evening to host the inspiring Franciscan leader, Father Michael Perry, the minister general of the Order of Friars Minor and I am delighted to have you all with us for this very special event. Father Perry has already visited with some of you at the Catholic Student Center, and at Sunday mass in Graham Chapel, and we're very grateful to Father Gary Braun for hosting him there. We are also very honored to have Archbishop Carlson with us this evening. The Center is always proud to partner with other units within the university and beyond, as we have this time, and we have lots of information about the Center outside this door when you exit, including a sign-up sheet for our email list and information about future events, of which we have many this semester. Let me briefly remind you to turn off your cell phones and other buzzing devices at this time and I'll just mention that our program here will last about an hour and will be followed by a festive reception outside, at which you are all very warmly invited.

Tonight's event comes to us through a friendship between Father Perry and the visionary behind our center's very existence, John C. Danforth himself. Senator Danforth will introduce Father Perry shortly and it's my honor to introduce him first. John C. Danforth is a partner in the law firm of Dowd Bennett. He graduated with honors from Princeton, where he majored in religion and he received a Bachelor of Divinity degree from Yale Divinity School and a Bachelor of Laws degree from Yale Law School. He practiced law for some years, then began his illustrious political career. He served three terms representing the state of Missouri in the U.S. Senate, after 8 years of service as Missouri's Attorney General. Following his elected service, Danforth held appointments in both Republican and Democratic administrations. He was special envoy to Sudan, where his focus was negotiating an end to the civil war in the south, and he was later U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations. He was also special counsel in the investigation of the federal raid on the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas. As an episcopal priest, Senator Danforth has been open about his Christian faith and has presided over many important occasions, including the funeral of President Ronald Reagan. He has also written some significant and incisive books, including *Faith and Politics: How the Moral Values Debate Divides America* and *How to Move Forward Together* and *The Relevance of Religion*. John currently serves on the boards of the Cerner Corporation and the non-profit, non-partisan Commission on Presidential Debates, as well as on the National Advisory Board of the John C. Danforth Center on Religion and Politics at Wash U. Please join me in welcoming Senator Danforth.

Senator John C. Danforth

Thanks, Marie. Marie, thank you very much. Father Michael Perry has his office in Rome, but he is a man on the move. In December, he wrote Father Gary Braun from the Republic of the

Congo. His Christmas letter reports on his travels to Syria. In late December, he went to Asia. This week, he leaves for South America. He is where Franciscans are, serving the world's poor and practicing the peacemaking work of reconciliation. That peacemaking ministry is how I met Father Perry. He had been... I had been George W. Bush's special envoy for peace in Sudan and was at the time our Ambassador to the United Nations. In Sudan and elsewhere, people were killing people of other faiths, believing that they were doing God's will. As we all know, that type of killing is going on today. But, where religion is the cause of bloodshed, shouldn't the opposite be true? The literal meaning of the word religion is to bind things together, and Christians are told that peacemakers are blessed, they will be called children of God. When I was at the UN, so was Father Perry when he was the African death coordinator for Franciscans International. His work was peacemaking in a place of ethnic cleansing. From that time on, he has been my tutor and my model for the peacemaking ministry of the church. His work crosses denominational lines and faith lines. He has built coalitions of Catholics, Protestants, Muslims, and other religions. In his words, Sudan was an opportunity for religious groups to demonstrate what they can do. The ministry of reconciliation has been more than aspirational. In Kenya, Franciscans have been central in bringing together other Christian denominations, as well as Muslims and Sikhs, and successful work to confront youths engaged in ethnic violence. In Burundi, a country beset with Hutu-Tutsi violence, the Catholic Church has developed programs with schoolchildren to create a culture of peace. Michael Perry was born in Indianapolis and entered the Franciscan order in 1977. He was ordained priest in 1984. For 10 years, he served as a missionary in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. He holds a doctorate in religious anthropology from Birmingham University in the UK. He became Vicar General of the Franciscans in 2009 and Minister General in 2013.

Let me say a word about why I think Father Perry's presence on this campus is so important. The sponsor of this evening is Washington University's Center on Religion and Politics. Its focus is on how religion and American politics interact. Clearly, peacemaking is an important contribution religion can make internationally in a world where bloodshed is provoked by religion. Here at home, the ministry of reconciliation is a gift religion can make to politics and a country as fractured as ours. There is practical relevance for Father Perry's ministry to the work of the Center but let me add another thought about this leader of the Franciscans coming to Washington University in St. Louis. A lot of us, of all ages, especially college students, wonder about the meaning of our lives. We hear from advertisers and self-improvement gurus that it's all about us. That our aim should be self-realization, success, amassing things. To many people, especially young people, that inward focus seems so very shallow. For people raised in a religious tradition, it seems especially empty. They have been taught that life isn't all about them. That they must love God and their neighbor. And if their faith is robust, their responsibility means more than going through the motions of religion. Let me quote from what Father Perry wrote me last summer: "religion is not simply about baptism, Biblical truths, liturgical rituals, and charitable works, religious belief and action is also about preventing violence, proposing alternatives to violence, promoting dialogue, collaboration, peace and reconciliation," so wrote Father Perry. In other words, we find meaning in life through commitment, action, living beyond ourselves, offering ourselves as reconcilers in a broken world. Faithful people know that this is so. They read it in Scripture, they've heard it from pulpits, but there's something special. When living for others is more than words, we read or hear. When it is meaning we witness, in flesh and blood, modeled in the lives of people we know, there are no better living examples of people

who live lives of service than the Franciscans. By what they do and who they are, they set the standard for what we must do and for who we are. So, for that reason especially, it's my honor to present to Washington University the Minister General of the Franciscans, Father Michael Perry.

[shows video <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fxLMvEROb-A>]

Father Michael Perry

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way—in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.” Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*. Nine months ago, I departed by car from Beirut, to visit our Franciscan communities in Damascus, Aleppo, and Latakia in Syria. 15 Franciscans working in the midst of war, two of whom I could not meet because they were living in villages under ISIS control. In Damascus, the terror of an endless cycle of exploding bombs 24 hours a day, reminded everyone that peace remained a distant hope. Unfortunately, bombs continued to rain down terror and insecurity in the capital city even this night. Along the heavily guarded road from Damascus to Aleppo, staffed by Syrian military, Hezbollah, and other hired mercenaries backed by Iran, we passed by a continuous chain of bombed-out abandoned villages and towns. Mounds of dirt pointing to hastily dug graves were flanked by bomb-induced craters. Brilliant springs of flowers covered the uncultivated fields, announcing nature's resistance and refusal to give in to despair and the temptation to renounce all hope. As we enter the city of Aleppo from the east, our minds were numbed by the unfathomable destruction, human and material. The consequences of a long history of grievances and abuses of decisions made by all parties to the war to resist any compromise and refuse any responsibility for past or current acts of violence. Our travel from Aleppo to Latakia, located on the Mediterranean Sea, took us through a strategic military zone for the Syrian government, Homs. The airfield in this city was identified as the launching site of government aircraft that carried sarin nerve gas released upon a rebel population stronghold in Khan Shaykhun, which resulted in the death of more than 70 people. Seven hours prior to our passing through Homs, U.S. airplanes had bombed the air strip. You cannot imagine how tight the security was, and I can tell you I was most grateful for one of the other times in my life to be a holder of an Irish passport. I'd used the Irish passport to enter the country, given the intricacies of international relationships at this time. I was also, and perhaps even more, grateful to be wearing the brown Franciscan habit, which, as it turned out, was a symbol to Christians, Muslims, the Syrians, and Hezbollah military, and the pro-government militias. It was a sign of peace. It was a sign of non-threat, religious workers who were not considered the enemy. Who were perceived as playing a positive role in responding to the needs of all victims of the war, irrespective of culture, regional religious class, or other differences.

In Aleppo and Latakia, I witnessed an entirely different story, not one of violence and war, but one of what happens when people come together around a shared set of values, what might be called common goods, even, in this case, if they were only temporary. These signs included care of victims of violence and war, the provision of housing for those whose homes were destroyed

and uninhabitable, provision of mental and physical healthcare, in clinics run mostly by Christian religious institutions, most of the government-owned hospitals were deprived of the necessary state funding and were no longer able to respond adequately to the mass of people seeking assistance. What also was striking was that in the context of war and destruction, groups who previously would never or rarely have ever had contact with one another, relationships with one another, were now working side by side, coming to the aide of those most in need. I was told by our Franciscans that prior to the war, the Orthodox and the different Catholic churches, and the different Protestant denominations rarely came together, and almost never collaborated on anything of substance. Sunni Muslims, 70% of the total population, did not engage with Shi'ites, with minority Druze, nor with Christians. All were obliged, however, to collaborate with the Islamic Alawite-controlled government, but only to the degree absolutely necessary. Standing in the middle of the destroyed city of Aleppo, the city that was thriving prior to the war, more than 3 million people, with less than 1 million when we arrived. People were able to identify several central, universal values or goods, around which they could unite for specific charitable programs and services. Obviously tonight, my role here is not to try to explain the complexities of the Syrian conflict, I'm sure you have local professors in political science who can do a much better job. That's not the purpose of my talk this evening. However, I wish only to highlight that in the worst of times, a chord within human nature is struck. A feeling or conviction takes shape that beyond political, cultural, class, and religious differences, there are certain inviolable rights and values that should never leave us indifferent. In the case of the small number of citizens of Damascus, Aleppo, and Latakia with whom I had the opportunity to interact and also with young people, it became clear that they no longer wanted previous divisions to keep them from working together in service to those most in need. In the face of such sheer violence and destruction, the vision or understanding of the world as it once was experienced, and the social networks organized according to these understandings were shifting. Will these be permanent transformations in patterns of social networking leading to new social structures within a post-war Syria? At this point in time, it's impossible to predict. But for those who are currently engaged in these newly defined social groups, perhaps these changes will be permanent. Professor David Hollenbach, a Jesuit professor at the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and Global Affairs in Georgetown has deftly argued religious communities can make important contributions to bringing both the idea and the reality of the common good back to the central place in public life. It's clearly this that I experienced in my visit to Syria.

Parenthetically, in Latakia, I attended a Catholic mass. I go to those sometimes. [Laughter]. But, what was very strange about this Sunday was there weren't just Catholics there. There were Orthodox. There were Protestants. There were Muslims, all present. When I asked somebody how is this possible, I was told that they were meeting one another during the week, helping one another and working together to respond to post-war needs. Some of their churches or mosques had been destroyed, and so they came to the Catholic church, not to convert, but to give thanks for another day of life, to pray for peace, and to be with the very people with whom they were building new networks of friendships, and through which they were rebuilding small portions of Syrian society one brick at a time. Their religious identities were not, as some argue, the major cause of social unrest, political instability, the restricting of individual rights and freedoms and the pursuit of a shared, if not universal, common good. I'm sure that Senator Danforth would concur with this assessment in his work to secure a peaceful exit of the southern region of Sudan from an intractable war and eventually achieving its independence. Unfortunately, many of the

political and military elite did not share the same vision, did not hold the same set of common goods and values, that drove the peace process and the creation of a new nation.

Tonight, I'm supposed to talk to you, though, about two other individuals, aren't I? So, what do Francis of Assisi, a mendicant friar of the 13th century, and Francis of Buenos Aires, or Jorge, a Jesuit and leader of the Catholic church, what do they have in common? Well, there's some simple things: at least today, they both bear the same name, both were born into middle class families with multiple children, possessing the material means necessary for supporting the education of their children. Both were baptized into a church that was struggling to reidentify itself in the historical context of their times. Both experienced the abuse of political, economic, and cultural power, and even the abuse of religious power, at times. The lording over [unintelligible], accompanied by major abuses of human rights, social and economic exclusion in the city streets of Assisi in the neighboring towns and in the central city and barrios of Buenos Aires. But these are not the primary reasons why I've chosen a mendicant friar, who after experiencing war and what might be described as a form of post-traumatic stress syndrome, found his life and his world turned upside down, in some ways, like the people of Aleppo, as the world he once believed in crumbled around him and also within him, he was forced to migrate, to undertake a deeply personal and spiritual journey in the search for answers. Perhaps, even, the search for a new vision of how life was intended to be lived, a way of life that would usher in a new era of peace, of inclusivity, a renewal of the bonds of communion between human beings. Even in the time of the life of Francis, war, violence, injustice, desecration of the human person, and the environment were factors that I believe contributed to his embarking on this journey in search of a new humanity for himself and for those around him.

As was the case with Francis of Assisi, the reason I have chosen to examine a man who studied philosophy and chemistry in Argentina, fell in and out of love, joined the Jesuit Society, served as the provincial of his order during the time of the Dirty War, conducted by the repressive military regime, costing the lives of more than 10,000 innocent victims, who was later named Archbishop of Buenos Aires, who took the bus to work and cooked for himself, kept in constant contact with the little persons and those who were poor or ill, developed strong bonds of friendship with a rabbi and a Muslim cleric that continues to today, and who now lives as a hotel guest within the walled city of the Vatican. The reason I chose him was not because of the coincidence of his birth or religious stature. I have chosen these two Francises because I believe they share a common understanding of how the world fits together, a world view, the place of human beings in this world, the meaning of life, and the responsibilities that come with discovery of that, the role of social institutions, including the political, economic, cultural, and religious institutions in promoting an inclusive vision of human life that creates those conditions of social life which allow for social groups and their individual members, relatively through access to their own fulfillment, and in respecting and protecting the natural environment. Each of them were drawn to the poor. Each of them were willing to cross boundaries that were denied to others, in the name of God, in the name of peace, in the name of hope. Each of them went to Egypt. In 1219, Saint Francis traveled there, we're not quite sure why he went. We know that he met the leader of the Muslim armies. Something happened when he came back, his prayer, his approach to life was transformed. We also remember, last year, the visit of Pope Francis to the university in Egypt, in Cairo, particularly his call, his presence among people he called brothers and sisters, journeying on the road to life toward a future filled with hope.

Perhaps, it would be important for me first to say a word about the common good, since I've not provided any specific definition of what I mean when using it. Sometime after sending the title to Professor Griffith, which included specific reference to the common good, I realized that I might be stepping into a political, cultural, and even theoretical minefield. Culture wars are the grist of fake news. For this, I would like to say a word about how I perceive the common good, from within the very tradition in which I have been formed and reformed, the Franciscan experiential and philosophical tradition and I must confess that most of what I've learned has been either at the dinner table or at late-night beer gardens. Students, I'm sure, can't relate to that. A group of Franciscan scholars articulating the character of the Franciscan world vision have provided me with what I call a synthetic description of the common good that you might find helpful. I like it, maybe it's not right, but I like it. They write: "the Franciscan moral vision embodies a distinct social vision that intersects the personal with the political, the individual with the communal, the singular life of virtue with the anticipation of the reign of God for all people." For Saint Francis, and I also believe for Pope Francis, and even for me, our place in the world is embedded in the interspecies of historical incidents and coincidence. Every event in life contains a message, an invitation, a challenge to step out of myself and enter into the lives of others, enter into the life of *the* other, however that other is named, God, eternal reverend. What makes Franciscan moral vision particular is its centrality on the human person. Franciscan moral vision is guided by the conviction that everything is connected, related, all belong in and all belong to the community that finds its grounding in the principle of love, love of God, the driving force of the universe, and the love we are to express in and through bonds of unconditional solidarity and universal fraternity.

The first aspect of a Franciscan moral vision involves the interplay of personal and political. The assumption behind this principle is that the rights and obligations in a democracy work in tandem. While I might claim my personal rights to any number of things, the right to free access to Internet, the right to time out, to free movement and association, to being alone to study or not to study, but I didn't say that, to join this or that group, whether it's religious or political or any other form, because I live within a society, a democracy, I also have obligations to participate actively in shaping decisions that will have serious consequences on our shared social life and on the environment. These two ideas that shaping our shared social life and the environment are very dear, I think, to the example of Saint Francis and also to Pope Francis. Saint Francis had the audacity, soon returning after his visit to the sultan, to write a letter to all the rulers of the world, and he called them to three things. He said don't forget that there's someone bigger than all of your power to whom you must give an account. There are some ones for whom you are responsible, for whom you are caretaker of, the people entrusted to you, and remember, you are going to die. The promotion—this means you are not going to last forever. The promotion and celebration of my personal freedom is dependent on the promotion and celebration of the freedom of others. One example of this might be the right to vote. Not only do I have the right to vote, I have the obligation to exercise this right as an act of justice and charity. The Franciscan vision is humanitarian: rights become what we owe to one another as sisters and brothers, rather than as claims we make over and against someone else. This should be regularly recognized, I hope, in the following section.

A second essential ingredient of a Franciscan moral vision, by the way, I am talking about two Franciscans here, the moral vision is that of an individual who works with, in, and through the

communal, the community, a reference to the central premise when speaking about the common good. The great Greek philosophers were convinced that social union is absolutely essential when speaking about a republic. Persons are bound together by strong connections or bonds. These may take different forms in society. Someone who was on this podium, I don't know when it was, sometime back, David Brooks, an advocate for the common good, recently applied the concept of attachment theory to what he defines as the foundations of society, a democracy. He argues that people can endure a lot if they have a secure base, but if you take away what he calls covenantal attachments: family, community, creed, and faith, people become fragile. David Hollenbach, I made reference to the Jesuit earlier, states that self-determination is not isolated self-sufficiency. Contemporary Western men and women did not all by themselves come to demand respect as self-determining agents, they learn to value self-determination through interaction with the larger society in its social, religious, and political history. Authentic forms of democracy work best when they take, as a starting point, respect for the diversity as an essential component. And perhaps, to drive home this attachment theory idea, an African philosophical proverb states: "I am because we, the family, clan, tribe, social or religious group, are." I am because we exist. The authentic good of persons is experienced always in and expressed only through communion with other human beings.

The third pillar for formation of a Franciscan moral vision is a singular life of virtue, with the anticipation of the reign of God for all. One of the definitions of virtue that's been popular over the centuries was proposed by Thomas Aquinas, and even we Franciscans have a heart of Dominicans. For Aquinas, primary moral virtue is justice, which directs a person's actions towards the good of fellow human beings. Because human beings are simultaneously individual persons and participants in the common life of the civil community, virtuous citizens will seek not only their own individual good, but they will also seek the larger good of the community. This notion has been described by the Catholic bishops of the United States as contributive justice, the contribution that is expected, demanded, of each person towards the common good. Authentic exercise of justice requires that human beings be active members of the community, the society, using their agency for their own good and that of the good of all in society.

I'd like to stop here for just a moment. I lived for ten years in the Democratic Republic of Congo, under Mobutu Sese Seko, a tyrant who killed people randomly, and one of the most debilitating realities of his rule was people just became despondent. They stopped thinking. They stopped organizing. They stopped studying and researching and questioning together. This, I think, did tremendous disservice and has delayed the democratic process in the Democratic Republic of Congo until now. I hear, I've been eight years away from the United States and almost nine, I hear that there is a particular political climate in the United States these days that perhaps will drive people to want to run away from their responsibilities. Do not run away. In his book entitled *Faith and Politics*, Senator Danforth states, yes I'm quoting you tonight Jack, "Christianity does not give us an agenda for American politics. It does not provide policy positions that can identify with certainty as being Christian. What it does offer is an approach, a way of thinking about and engaging in politics that while not issue-specific, is highly relevant to our ability to live together as a nation, despite our strongly-held differences. Political participation, the shaping of the City of God, does not and, indeed, should not exclude and explicitly religious vision of the full communion to which we are called to live with one another and for believers, that communion we are called to live with God. The central question is not

whether religious belief and communities who live their faith have a role to play in shaping the earthly city, but rather how religion is to play that role. The only absolute is God, with whom human beings enter into full relationship only in the heavenly Jerusalem, the City of God according to believers. But the political domain has the potential to become a partial embodiment of the full human good. This potential points to a form of politics that seeks greater solidarity, not just toleration or the protection of individuals in their solitude. Nor is it about making a deal. It is about building a community. It is about building consensus.” This will be a politics that seeks the common good in freedom, the common good of a community of freedom. Christian community can make important contributions to the common good of this type of community, this community of freedom, such a contribution is urgently needed in a world that is both more and more interdependent and less and less sure that a common life is possible.

I’d like to return. I’ve been talking about a number of things, but all of these things are reflective in the values that the two peoples central to tonight’s discussion bear. First, what does Francis and Francis, what do they have in common? They are people who believe that God is present everywhere. They are driven by a spiritual vision of the world. Each made his own particular movement toward the poor, so the poor have a particular role to play in the lives of each of them, and if you will pick up any of the documents that Pope Francis has written and if you don’t believe me, you can ask the Archbishop, he’ll confirm this. In virtually every document that the Pope has written, there is reference to the poor, to God’s underwing, God’s preferential, the God who will make sure if no one else cares for them, God will be with them. So, each of them, this movement toward the poor transformed their lives. Each of them is convinced that human beings are capable of making change, of undergoing transformation and conversion, individual and social. Each of them believe that dialogue is the way to a renewed vision of humanity to peace and to the satisfaction of people’s basic fundamental rights and needs. Each was willing to take risk and to appear, at times, to be a bit crazy. Each was willing to cross boundaries, and I’ve already talked about the two visits, 1219 and 2017, the two visits of two Francises, two different periods, in each case, finding themselves either going into the experience or returning from it, walking away being able to say ‘I have been with my brothers and my sisters. I have not been with my enemies.’ Each holds in reverence all of life. Each are committed to the pursuit of peace and reconciliation, and I think this has been made clearly certainly in the life of Saint Francis, peace was a central priority for him, the proposing models of how... what would be one model for St. Francis that he could propose to the world. His model, he called it fraternity. That every person is a member of one family. Everyone is responsible for everyone else. He saw these, and I think Pope Francis does to, as mandates for how the church, how human societies and individuals are to live in harmony with one another. These central themes, if you will, join with a third theme, that of care for the planet, care for the environment, form the three pegs, if you will, the three supporting pillars in how they see the world might be rebuilt.

These three themes also are found in a song-prayer composed by St. Francis of Assisi toward the end of his life, the last two years of his life, he worked on it in three different periods. It’s funny, these aren’t words that he wrote, these are words that he sang and someone wrote the words down. But, in that prayer called “The Canticle of the Creatures,” Francis moves from, in and out of three central moments. In the first moment, he recognizes that humanity is not listening to anyone being sent from God or from any place that is good. And so, he talks with creation. He begins a talk with creation because he witnesses in creation a willingness. He sees within

creation already an availability, a voluntary capacity to cooperate with the creator and to be of service to other living creatures. Then he goes and talks about what human beings have done to themselves and to each other, how we have destroyed each other, broken faith with each other, and he calls for a renewal of the relationships, a healing of those relationships and then he confronts the ultimate obstacle, perhaps the ultimate passage that all of us will have to make. He confronts death, which is very near to his door, and he welcomes death, he embraces Sister Death. He names each of these elements by a personal name because they bear the image of life and of hope, because they are personal to him, because they have a relationship with him.

In the opening paragraph of the encyclical of Pope Francis, *Laudato si'*, he makes clear his desire to connect the history of social teaching of the Catholic Church on the environment and on the issue of care for the poor, care for humanity in all moments of existence, to be an integral part of a vision that he sees that is inherently filled with dignity, that makes connections between all moments of life, human beings connected with the created universe. St. Francis writes “the Pope reminds us that our common home, Earth, is like a sister with whom we share our life and a beautiful mother who opens her arms to embrace us. Because our sister and Mother Earth are under attack and faces the risk of being exploited beyond her capacity to respond or recover from the assault, the Pope seeks to create an open dialogue, inviting all people to once again return to a place where we can recognize not only ourselves as being connected, but that we are connected with all that exists.” This dialogue is not simply to generate a new discourse on the environment, although Pope Francis currently has this intention. He’s concerned rather with raising awareness, generating new energy among political leaders, religious leaders, scientists, university professors, students, and ordinary citizens of the global community in order to both avoid a potential ecological catastrophe but also to return to an understanding of the integral nature of life, all of life. So, it’s not just about saving the planet, it’s about saving ourselves. Pope Francis insists that we must no longer speak of the interests of the human community in isolation and independence from the interests of the environment. Genuine care for our own lives and our relationships with nature is inseparable from fraternity, justice, and faithfulness to others to the human community. When these fundamental relationships are not respected, human beings grant themselves permission to exploit one another, to exploit all human relationships, and to exploit the natural environment without any consideration of the impact this might have on the dignity of people and the inherent dignity of creation. The poor become poorer and increasingly disenfranchised. Inequality leads to a gradual dumbing down of our ability to appreciate and critically analyze the consequences of the models of development that are currently in vogue, the impact these have on our identities, on our social wellbeing, and on our environment. Pope Francis also recognizes the need to develop and commit to a new integral, what he calls an integral ecological vision, with guiding principles, a charter, that might help us together as a human community face the one single complex crisis that has two sides: social and environmental. Strategies or solutions will demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and, at the same time, protecting nature. What do Francis of Assisi and Pope Francis have in common? Everything. Thank you.

Marie Griffith

We have a few minutes for questions, so... Would you like me to call on people or do you want to call on people as you see them? We have two mics going around, so please wait for the mic to come to you.

Father Michael Perry

And if I don't know the answer, I'll find somebody out there who does.

Audience Question #1

Thank you so much. So, we have divisions, not only in our country, but in our church. If you could address paths to healing and the divisions in our church, we have a hard time keeping together the common good and the defense of vulnerable life, insights into how that can be imagined and carried forward.

Father Michael Perry

I don't have any big ideas. I remember at home when we, my brother and I, the oldest brother, we would fight all the time, it was just something about the chemistry, we get along very well now. We've laughed about whatever it was, but my mother would simply call us in and sit us down and she would make us sit there until we'd start talking to each other. It's a silly, perhaps, equation but when's the last time we sat down at the dinner table with our families and just talked about life, talked about some of the difficulties that we're having, talked about our differing political views or view on religion or ethics or anything? We can do that usually, with even teenagers it's possible and with younger children we can talk about certain things. I really think that Pope Francis and other great leaders, the path to creating a path is always through dialogue. It's how you move towards even the possibility of thinking about peace. If two parties cannot sit down together and be willing to stay in the same room, there's a—he died last year—I really, actually like reading what he wrote, a guy named Zygmunt Bauman, he's a philosopher, Polish, migrated to Russia and ended up... was formed in school in Paris and then ended up dying at England, part of the global movement. But, he said two things in a book recently published, don't read it in English, it's unintelligible, read it in French or in Italian, because the English is horrible, but... I'm not saying that to say I know those languages, I just know English is very bad. But, two things. He says, number one, we are creating gated minds, gated hearts, gated communities. We're filling them with people who agree with us, who think the same way we think, and he said what we're doing is we're closing ourselves in, we're burying ourselves. We are, and the other term he goes on to use is we are, we talk about and criticize tribalism, we are re-tribalizing our communities and he says this has got to stop if there's any hope, we have to break out of this mentality, we have to find a way to sit down with each other. I'm sure there are many more [unintelligible], those are two things that come to mind.

Just go—okay sorry, yeah? Yes, please?

Audience Question #2

Hi, so I know it's silly to say that the, kind of, mysticism began with Francis of Assisi, but he definitely started a movement within the church that kind of pushed it along and, of course, John Paul II, I consider to be one of the greatest mystics of the modern age. So, how is Pope Francis contributed to mysticism within the church of today, similar to how Francis of Assisi helped with the church in the 13th century, how do you view his contributions?

Father Michael Perry

So, when we talk, I know that John Paul II made a reference to Francis being a great mystical saint and then repeated it, what do we mean when we talk about mysticism? Is it...

Audience Question #2

[No microphone for the first part, so difficult to understand] I suppose just kind of the interior life and kind of advancing the whole church. The second to that, it becomes really enshrined, the words of the [unintelligible] reformers, kind of growing closer, kind of climbing the spiritual mountain and so, how is Pope Francis kind of led the church in that direction?

Father Michael Perry

Well, mystics are people who try to, and this is my interpretation anyone can have any other view, but I think mystics are people who are able to help, not only themselves, but help others look at what is. I think the nature of mysticism is to, it's not to escape and to go to some realm, some space. I'm not sure if it's about climbing or it's about descending. I really think mysticism is about descending. Descending... and why do I say this? Because one of the key mystical figures, I think, in the history for Christians is Jesus, and in the text of Jesus it's not about climbing, it's about going down. Going down to where there's pain, going down to where there's darkness, going down to where there's hopelessness, going down to where there's destruction and tearing apart, being willing to go down and to stand in the middle of that and that is, I think, the beginning. I think that is the beginning. How is Pope Francis helping us to do that? He's inviting us to go down. His model of the church is a church that goes down, and, I can be corrected here, but I really think this is the way of humility, and I think that's the word that's been described about this Pope most. He's a man willing to bend down and I said he takes risks, he bends down on a holy Thursday and washed the feet of a Muslim woman in prison. If that's not a mystical event, if that's not calling us to some new, radical form of understanding how God is, who God is, what God is calling me to do, well, then, maybe I'm lost. [Applause]. Okay, back here?

Audience Question #3

In an age where moral relativism seems to be becoming the modern-day religion, I was wondering what steps you think the church can take to begin to heal this culture which seems to have gone so awry?

Father Michael Perry

Well, I... First, just kind of a theoretical difficulty I have with the word relativism. It really has to be carefully, I think, and I think Pope Benedict has asked us to do this very carefully employed, it can't be used to categorize things. It really, I think, the notion of relativism looks, advises us to look at wholeness and to avoid what you might call the breaking apart, the fragmentation, and then selectively choosing pieces of the fragmented that you like. I think, maybe, I'd say that first and I'm not sure that what I've said is clear and if not, I can repeat it later in different words, maybe in a different concept. I think secondly, my experience, frankly, with young people is anything but, in one sense, relativism, right? And maybe I'm not hearing correctly. I have run into a lot of young people around the globe who are looking for authentic values that will help them build some cohesion, help them give some sense. Now, there's a danger in that search, I think, for all of us because sometimes we can absolutize things that are, in fact, relative because we don't make the distinction between the two. And so, we end up creating, in a sense, new idols for ourselves, they give us security and peace, but they're not really helping us in our growth. And again, I'm using two languages here: a secular language of growth toward fuller human realization within the communal context, but from a spiritual, from a

religious standpoint, I think that the invitation for us is to... This is what Pope Francis, I think, helps us again but not just Pope Francis, he borrowed it from somebody else, I'm sure. He went through a Jesuit novitiate and he uses the word discernment. That word is a very very important word because that helps us, when we develop tools and you should be doing that, by the way, here. The tools that you are learning I hope the tools that are being taught at the Danforth Center, etcetera, these should be helping us create a critical understanding of things, being able to separate and once we're able to separate, then we're able to begin to see and ask questions about what is truth and then, to begin to construct, but never to do it alone, we need to construct truth together, because—either because we'll create things for ourselves that will be pleasant, but will not be truthful, or we will never come to a synthesis with what it is we are trying to find. So, let me return to your questions: what is the danger of relativism? On the one hand, this fragmentation and selective choosing of elements that are not things that will lead us to truth, that will lead us to wholeness. There is a danger I accept that. On the other hand, I want to thank young people and I want to thank God for what God is doing in young people. He's doing it in older people, too, it's not... [Laughter]. What God is doing in younger people because younger people are not afraid to ask serious questions about anything, and I don't think it's frivolous. I think they're serious questions because they want—they're trying to figure out what is it? Where is the wholeness, where are the values that are going to help me respond to God, to life, to community, to family, to myself in a way that will allow all of us to really live well? And by 'live well' I mean ideally that term Shalom, living well with God, living well with ourselves, living well with others. I hope, I don't know if I've given you any response, and maybe not a satisfactory one, but... okay.

Marie Griffith

I think that's a perfect place to conclude. Please join us for the reception out here and please join me in thanking the inspiring Father Michael Perry.