

**Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation – JPIC**  
**FRANCISCAN DNA**  
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**Introduction**

One of the most misunderstood anacronyms in the Church is JPIC: Justice, Peace & the Integrity of Creation. Francis of Assisi, when he was a young soldier, would have equated justice with an increase of wealth and civic pride. His view of peace would likely be found to a treaty that brought him and the Commune of Assisi dominance in the region. Today, the work of “justice” is often avoided by many believers, as it is seen as something being only related to political or economic movements, rather than the engagement of moral issues that affect us all. At the same time, we reduce “peace” to a hallow understanding of harmony, found in feel-good moments of self-congratulations that may initially raise up important issues within a news cycle, but then fail to have them take root in our hearts and minds. In the time of Francis and Clare of Assisi, many viewed nature, including people, as something to be dominated for the sake of profit. This mentality still exists today, yet for too many believers, when we speak of protecting the “integrity of creation” there is a backlash of feeling co-opted into the elite eco-friendliness of the misinformed rather than discerning our moral responsibility to connect the cry of the poor with the cry of the planet.

Our contemporary trifurcation of JPIC cheapens its meaning and frustrates the average believer. Too often JPIC, or social justice as it is commonly called, is dismissed as a disjointed optional add on to our faith, only embraced by liberals or an uninformed, idealistic, and at times angry younger generation. To dispel these false myths, we turn to Francis and Clare. Their lives afford us a new hope of living the Gospel in a manner that opens us all to the understanding of the social teaching of the Church being a constitutive part of our faith.

**Francis & the Leper**

For Francis of Assisi, the young soldier, the time of his captivity in Perugia began a process of conversion that would take many turns throughout his life. In the darkness he turned away from the illusions of grandeur promised through the defeat of another soldier in battle, another city in war. His gaze turned inward as he battled with a grace growing inside of him that would offer no quarter as his own defenses waned. The sharpness of his convictions, formed as a wealthy merchant’s son, began to dull as he grew hungry, sick, and weak. He became vulnerable and in time surrendered himself to whatever might be.

A year later, Francis lay convalescing in his family’s home off the main square of Assisi. Listening to the hustle and bustle though the window, Francis came to the realization that he had changed. He was quieter than he once was, attuned to sounds of which before he had been unaware. They were sounds that had become all too familiar in the previous year. It was the sound of the cry of the hungry man in search of food. It was the sound of the ill woman in search of healing. It was the sound of the lonely children in search of comfort. It was the sound of the beating of his own heart, in search of the small grace of hope that had helped to keep him alive while in prison.

Then one day, as he was riding his horse just outside of the city wall, Francis' heart quickened when he became aware of another sound. This sound brought him dread, for it came from a leper's bell. Knowing how the sight of a leper viscerally nauseated him, Francis quickly allowed for a lot of room to pass between them. In that moment something that had been growing within Francis shifted and shook him to the core. Perhaps the trigger was the sound of the leper's voice or the smell of the leper that carried on the wind. Whatever it may have been, Francis was moved to turn his horse around, to dismount and stand before the leper. There he sensed the grace of hope that had embraced him in the desperate loneliness of his prison cell. As if reaching through the darkness of captivity, he moved to embrace the leper and then kissed him. When the leper then held out his hand in hope of receiving some alms as well, Francis reached into his purse to offer charity. Having then mounted his horse to depart, Francis turned back only to find that the leper had disappeared. Suddenly, he realized that he had embraced Jesus Christ.<sup>1</sup>

Reminiscing on this liminal moment in his life, Francis wrote in his *Testament*, "When I was in sin, the sight of lepers nauseated me beyond measure; but then God himself led me into their company, and I had pity on them. When I became acquainted with them, what had previously nauseated me became the source of spiritual and physical consolation for me."<sup>2</sup> This encounter triggered a profound shift in the very core of the person of Francis, which led to his having intuitively engineered Franciscan DNA.

The change that had taken place within him compelled Francis to embrace the leper in a manner so matter of fact, that if he had turned away, he would have been betraying his very self. This led to his own consideration of the injustices inflicted upon lepers. Then gazing upon them with the eyes of his heart, Francis willingly chose to place himself in their presence, in solidarity. Just a few miles outside the city wall of Assisi, at Saint Mary Magdalen, a home and a ministry grew for Francis and his early followers. It was marked by a simple grace of mutual friendship.

Francis and the brothers also came with their own hurts in need of healing. Being estranged from his angry father, the leper colony had become a place of refuge for Francis. There he discovered a safe place, where his father would not venture. There he escaped the prison of domestic abuse suffered at home. So, in the presence of the lepers, of Jesus Christ, Francis both offered and found the hope of peace, the shalom spoken of in the Scriptures, which had spiritually and physically change him.

Elsewhere in his *Testament* Francis writes: "The friars should be delighted to follow the lowliness and poverty of our Lord Jesus Christ, remembering that of the whole world we must own nothing; but having food and sufficient clothing, with these let us be content, as St Paul says. They should be glad to live among social outcasts, among the poor and helpless, the sick and the lepers, and those who beg by the wayside."<sup>3</sup> Here Francis is writing the story of how integrity was restored within himself, his early followers, and the lepers. As part of the beauty of God's creation, Francis goes on to tell how their newfound simplicity of life opened for them untrod paths upon which to journey. Along the way, dignity would be restored to many through compassion, while always harkening back to the Franciscan friendship with the lepers: "The friars are free to engage in any other activity which is not contrary to our Rule, with God's

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<sup>1</sup> *Life of Saint Francis* by an Anonymous Monk of a German Monastery, FA:ED, vol. 3, 841A.

<sup>2</sup> Saint Francis of Assisi. *The Testament*, CA:ED, 59.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

blessing. But if there are lepers in urgent need, the friars may beg alms for them, only they must be on their guard against money."<sup>4</sup>

Francis' reminiscing in his *Testament*, about these earlier days of the Order, provide for us a context of how JPIC became the DNA of all Franciscans. It began with an encounter with the other. Having gazed upon the injustice suffered by the lepers, Francis placed himself in solidarity with them as the first step of restoring JUSTICE. There, in the shalom that was fostered at the leprosarium of Saint Mary Magdalen, Francis and the early friars spend years building a way of PEACE, found through mutual friendship. They then went on to inspire the stories that come down to us today. Stories brimming with compassion as they tell of the restoration of dignity within others and themselves! Here the INTEGRITY of CREATION is renewed through their Franciscan life of practically bringing the resurrection of Jesus Christ to the crucified places of the world.

### **JPIC as Franciscan DNA**

Franciscans claim JPIC as our DNA, the fundamental and distinctive characteristics of who we are as lesser brothers & sisters. As such, it has significant impact on how we embody the Gospel, while reading the signs of the times. As followers of the Poverello, we are called to return to the roots of our tradition, to the stories of Francis, Franciscans through the centuries, and Franciscan hearted people today. There we will discover how JPIC is not so much something we do, but rather how we act in relationship with God, one another, and all of creation. This is a new, more holistic, paradigm for the Franciscan family and the larger Christian community. Rethinking JPIC as Franciscan DNA, shifts our perspective toward an intergraded understanding of living our faith as a continual prayer in action, which opens a space where the human family can share more fully the treasures of material and spiritual goods.

The introduction of Pope Francis' encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*, is a call for us to discover this Franciscan DNA within ourselves, so that:

- Like Saint Francis of Assisi, we become the servants of all, inspiring the vision of a fraternal society.
- Like Francis, we approach others not to draw them into our own lives, but to help them become ever more fully themselves. In turn, we become more ourselves.
- Like Francis, we can seek justice, welcome peace, and tell the stories of the integrity our lives, only after we free ourselves from the desire to wield power and truly become lesser brothers & sisters.

### ***Justice***

It is said that "justice is blind". Our eyes often deceive us, so Franciscans look at the world through the eyes of the heart. This serves as a type of blindness that heightens our other senses to better orient them towards charity. With Christ we hear, feel, taste, and smell the injustices suffered by those whom we encounter. Mindful that justice is giving to others that which they are due, we first resist the temptation to tell the other what we think that might be. Instead, we open the eyes of our hearts, begin a conversation, and ask what it is that they need. Only then

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

can we respond by placing ourselves in a true solidarity with those who carry the heavy crosses of today. Pope Saint Paul VI reminds us that the pursuit of peace and justice are at the heart of solidarity when he says, “if you want peace, work for justice”.

Within this relationship of solidarity, like Francis with the leper, we also discover who we truly are as *lesser* brothers & sisters who have promised to be servants to all. United to the poor and crucified Christ, our hearts then move us to just actions.

### *Peace*

Consider the abiding image of peace, the olive tree. It takes years to bear fruit, thereby serving as a reminder that peace is the long game, requiring patience and hard work. Healing the hurts caused by injustice require careful attention and time, as does fostering forgiveness in our hearts and the working out of restitution. In the Gospels, Christ offers us peace, shalom. This is not the absence of conflict. Instead, it is a promise to remove fear from our hearts, that we might better orient our senses to reveal to others how the fullness of God’s kingdom is breaking open into our lives. Slowly, through this relational way of peace, we bring the hope of the resurrection to the crucified places of this world.

While justice places us in solidarity with others, all of creation, and with Jesus Christ, peacebuilding enables us to then transform these relationships through a constant fraternal embrace of hope. Here too like Francis among the lepers, we discover who we truly are, lesser *brothers e<sup>3</sup> sisters*, given to one another in the peace of Jesus Christ and called to proclaim that message in word and deed.

### *Integrity of Creation<sup>5</sup>*

For 800 years, from the mountains of central Italy to far distant shores, Franciscans share a common characteristic of storytelling. Creation holds our stories, and at the same time our brother mountains & sister rivers have stories of their own. Our stories hold the integrity of who we are, the lifeblood that connects us to each other and to the incarnate Christ.

We have come to learn that when suffering people retrieve the power to tell their own stories, profound liberation can occur. People find freedom in telling stories of struggle because these stories show us that things are not as they should be. There are many false stories today, so we tell stories that restore the integrity of creation, of which the human person is an essential part. In the tradition of Scripture and the lives of the saints, our stories, the stories of creation, bring healing through creativity, community, and justice, because in them we catch glimpses of a new world.

So, like Francis’ writing in his *Testament* about his encounter with the leper, as *lesser brothers e<sup>3</sup> sisters* we listen to and re-tell the stories of the places and people who hurt most. In this way we help to create new paths forward toward greater justice, peace, and wholeness for our communities and for creation.

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<sup>5</sup> For section on the Integrity of Creation, ideas and language were borrowed from [The Telling Takes Us Home: Our Place in the Stories that Shape Us](#); A People’s Pastoral Letter from the Catholic Committee of Appalachia, December 2015.

## JPIC & Franciscan Prayer<sup>6</sup>

Francis of Assisi intuitively engineered our Franciscan DNA through his encounter with the leper. Clare of Assisi then intentionally nurtured Franciscan character in quiet prayer, from within the walls of San Damiano. She is the kind mother who offers practical wisdom to us, her children, through piercing insights that push us to reject any compromise in life that would lead to the betrayal of anyone's integrity. Through her fourfold method of prayer, Clare offers us a path to GAZE with the eyes of the heart, to CONSIDER the depths of friendship, to CONTEMPLATE the beauty of weakness, and to IMITATE collaboration toward the common good.

### *Gazing*

Clare spent countless years gazing at Jesus Christ. She certainly spent long hours in the presence of the San Damiano cross, from which the Lord spoke to Francis and instructed him to go and rebuild the church. More importantly, however, Clare learned to turn the gaze of her heart to all that was around her. In doing this she surrendered her herself completely as she fell into the arms of God.

Everywhere Clare saw Jesus Christ. This gazing of her heart was marked by an ability to be drawn in by the captivating beauty of the Lord, as Jesus Christ revealed Himself in what most would consider ugly. Clare would gaze upon a broken human being or a broken part of creation and be caught off balance. This was not because she was shocked by what she saw, but because she was lovingly drawn into the love of Christ crucified before her.

### *Considering*

Clare then connects the heart to the mind when she invites us to consider, as we fall more deeply in love with Jesus Christ. It was through considering mindfully the scriptures and the tradition of the Church that Clare was able to eventually express her desire to unite herself to Jesus Christ through her Rule of absolute poverty. Inspired by the life of Jesus and the Acts of the Apostles she understood the early church's tradition of holding of everything in common. This was a but a means of fostering true friendship that could hold the weight of peacebuilding in an unjust world.

Clare remained ever firm in her conviction of seeking the privilege poverty. Often disagreeing with the Pope, she never broke their bond of mutual friendship, which was ever strengthened at the table of the Eucharist and at the table in the refectory. Together Clare and the Pope carried the cross of their disagreement. The years of discussion and prayer became a model of peacebuilding for the whole Franciscan family. Just before her death, Clare experienced a foretaste of the Resurrection when she received the approval for her Rule, from her friend Pope Innocent IV.

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<sup>6</sup> N.B. For section on Franciscan Prayer, ideas and language were borrowed from Clare of Assisi: A Heart Full of Love; By Ilia Delio, OSF, May 2007.

## *Contemplating*

Many believe that beauty rests in the eye of the beholder. Franciscans offer a different perspective, through Clare's way of contemplation. We foster within ourselves the ability to perceive the ugly and loathsome as beautiful because we have already considered, within scripture and the tradition of the Church, how God's love dwells precisely in weakness. Our contemplation then demands of us that we see the other truthfully, for who the other is and not what many expect them to be.

Clare insists that to be true to ourselves, we must open the eyes of our hearts to penetrate through the mystery of suffering and to find Christ present, in the same way we do with the Eucharist, where Christ is present in vulnerability and simplicity. Our contemplation heightens our senses to hear and smell the cry of the poor, to taste and touch the cry of the earth as our hearts become one with them.

## *Imitating*

While traditional monastic contemplation leads to rest in God, Franciscan contemplation leads to action where we become the very presence of Jesus Christ in our world today. We cast aside all fear, in the peace of the shalom of Jesus Christ, to respond to the call of the scriptures from the future. In this way, our bonds of friendship further enhance the common good by the living and telling the stories of our lives of grace. Thus, our imitation is not our living like the saints of the past, but rather, it is our being the saints of today.

In our gazing we are compelled to contemplate, so as to place ourselves in solidarity with the suffering and vulnerable. Here the seeds of justice are sowed and begin to bud forth as a little plant of hope. This plant is then nurtured over time, through mutual friendship, which eventually flowers and offers up a fragrance of peace. Then others gather around as the little plant begins to tell anew its story of restored integrity, and creation is made new in the telling.

## Conclusion

Francis' encounter with the leper engineered our Franciscan DNA as JPIC, while Clare's life of prayer formed our Franciscan character. Coupled together, our Franciscan choices of acting the world are often seen as foolish to the wealthy and perplexing to the powerful. As they climb the ladder of worldly success, we descend the stairs of JPIC and prayer, as lesser brothers & sisters. There we place ourselves in solidarity with the suffering and vulnerable, as is exemplified in the Incarnation. Our seeking of justice through solidarity leads to a transformation of our relationships into a shared hope for the peace of Jesus Christ, mirroring His Passion and Resurrection. Thus, through peacebuilding, we begin to weave together a new narrative, for the telling of a story that has the power to restore the integrity of creation and announce the Good News of Jesus Christ to all the world.

### *Example from the Life of Saint Francis: Rivotorto*

Having received permission from the Pope to live the Gospel, Francis and his early followings returned to Assisi. In Rivotorto they established what would be known as the Franciscan Order's first novitiate, a year of prayer and discernment. An important aspect of their life of common prayer and penance was fasting. One evening a young friar was calling out pain, as the fasting had become too severe for his body. Francis' response to the friar's cry for help exemplifies how Franciscan DNA works.

Having heard the cry, Francis hurried to the friar to comfort him, as a mother would comfort her son. He placed himself in solidarity with the brother when he quickly found some food and began to eat with the friar. Notice how Francis does not only feed the friar, thereby maintaining his own observance of fasting, but he also eats with him! This restoring of the friar to health, having understood that the fasting was too severe, became an act of justice. At the same time the act of eating with the friar was the beginnings of building peace within their hearts and those of the other friars.

Many might think that Francis' duty as a Minister was completed in this charitable act of breaking his own fast to be in solidarity with the hungry brother. Francis, however, shows us that this is only the beginning of the long work of peace. Francis then proceeds to wake all the other brothers and bids them to join him in the refectory, where together they all might break their fast. The dining room table in Rivotorto, in that moment, became the perfect extension of the Eucharistic table, where shalom is offered for the fostering of mutual friendship, mirroring the divine.

By bringing all the friars together, to break the fast, Francis saved the hurting brother the unnecessary embarrassment of being singled out as lacking in some way. At the same time Francis worked with all the brothers to better discern their ascetic practices, in light of God's law of charity. This is the hallmark of peacebuilding within community, by the recognizing the limits of all the brothers and together discerning how the common good of the community might advance.

From this experience a story was born, a tale told for over 800 years, that is still as relevant today as it was on that night in Rivotorto so long ago. In the retelling of the story, Franciscans are reminded that God's law of love is foundational and absolute in our lives as lesser brothers and sisters. Other laws, of the church or society might better serve if they are bent or even broken at times, for the sake of restoring justice and building peace. Then such laws must be reconsidered for the sake of the common good. Such rules or practices may have outlived their usefulness or become obsolete overtime as the spirit was lost or forgotten.

In 1209, when the Pope approved our way of living the Gospel, one might say the Franciscan Order was born or created. In the initial zeal and fervor of Francis and the early friars, they made the mistake of excessive penance. While their intentions were pure, their actions met the reality of the human person as the integrity of not only one, but all had been compromised. Francis' example of leading the friars through a process of justice expressed in solidarity, and peacebuilding saved the community from a rigidity. At the same time, it gave birth to a holy

flexibility within our Franciscan tradition. Thus, the integrity of the creation of the Order was restored and the friars advanced along the way of peace sharing the story of Rivortorto.

### ***Franciscan Example 1: Explosion in Beirut, Lebanon***

On 4 August 2020, a large amount of ammonium nitrate stored at the Port of Beirut in the capital city of Lebanon exploded, causing at least 218 deaths, 7,000 injuries, and US\$15 billion in property damage, as well as leaving an estimated 300,000 people homeless.

In the aftermath of the explosion many priests and religious hurried to provide food and clothing for those in need. During the chaos, the Latin Bishop of Beirut, Franciscan Friar Cesar Essayan, took the time to stop and listen to the suffering of the people. As a result of his seeing through the eyes of his heart, he asked the priests and religious to stop their distribution of food (knowing that other relief agencies had enough for everyone) and called them to place themselves in solidarity with the people by listening to their anguish, to their cries for understanding. The people were asking, “*Why? Where is God?*” This was the uncomfortable place where the lesser brothers & sisters (servants & ministers) were being called by God to seek justice and stand in solidarity with His People. In the months that followed, and still today, the lesser brothers and sisters in Beirut continue to struggle with the people to find answers to their questions. Together they look for hope and peace in the midst of corruption and many other injustices. These stories are being told and retold to those who would listen. Their stories become our stories, and the telling slowly brings us home to one another and to God as we seek a new integrity in our living in God’s creation in Lebanon.

### ***Franciscan Example 2: Recycling in the United States***

In 2020, the Guardian of a friary in the United States, proudly shared that the friars were finally recycling. When he was asked what had changed, he replied that the local government now required all households and businesses to recycle. Our Franciscan moral theologian, Blessed John Duns Scotus would say that this act of the friars recycling (because of the local municipal requirement) is morally neutral at best! *So, why do lesser brothers & sisters recycle?*

Turning to Pope Francis’ *Laudato Si*, we can better see ourselves in relationship with all of creation (especially our sister, Mother Earth), as we hear the cry of the poor and the cry of the planet, we place ourselves in solidarity with them. We open the eyes of our hearts to sense the suffering that comes from unbridled consumerism and the effects of a throwaway culture. From within us we are moved to embrace and protect them as we find new ways of living in peace with one another. And then we begin again, by telling the stories of living a simple lifestyle in an increasingly complicated world. So, why do we recycle? We recycle because we would not be true to ourselves, to our brothers & sisters, to creation, and to Christ, if we didn’t recycle!

### ***Franciscan Example 3: Food Security in Colombia***

In April/May 2021 a general strike began in Colombia, over an unpopular tax reform related to food, which then grew into an outburst of rage over poverty exacerbated by the pandemic, human rights abuses, and the authorities’ heavy-handed response to protests.



In 2019 the Colombian friars in formation (and their directors) participated in a JPIC program entitled, *“Being Lesser Brothers e3 Preferential Option for the Poor”*. This helped them to better understand how we are all responsible for one another and must care for one another, especially the poor and vulnerable. Their hearts were opened even more towards the poor within their local community, which also included many refugees from Venezuela. When the “food & fuel” crisis began in 2021, the friars were primed to hear, feel, taste, and smell the injustices.

When their people began organizing marches, the friars also began to make signs calling for justice and peace. Their large banner hung above the door of the friary. The smaller signs were carried by the friars as they walked alongside their people, in solidarity, protesting their governments harmful actions and disregard for the poor. The friars were not political activists. They were simply being lesser brothers, in solidarity with their people who were addressing moral issues. The presence of the friars in the protest was a part of the process of peacebuilding, as they brought a sense of peace and order to the protests in which they participated. The work of peace is long and hard, often pushing us outside of our comfort zones into places where, with others, we also need to stand for and demand some form of justice.

These moments have become part of the stories of the friars and their people in Colombia. They are still telling these stories today, as they continue the hard work of peacebuilding by naming and healing the injustices that still fester within their country. In their stories they ask for the dignity of the poor to be respected and responded to with integrity of heart. *Why did these friars make signs, march in protests, and continue to tell the stories of May 2021?* Because they would not have been true to themselves as lesser brothers if they had not done so!

#### ***Franciscan Example 4: Environmental e3 Social Work in Brazil***

The friar director of multiple environmental and social work ministries tells the story of his being in a meeting with one of the marginalized groups the friars serve. With years of experience (and multiple academic degrees) the friar knew that the decision that group was about to make would not work. There were better solutions, and this decision would delay his hoped-for desires for the group to quickly move forward. During the discussions, the friars chose to stay silent and then embraced the decision of the group. The reason he did this was because, at a foundational level, the marginalized group had never been empowered to decide anything of their own. They were always told what to do by others. For the first time a decision was their own. With the eyes of his heart, the friar placed himself in solidarity with his people, in the space of the decision they asked him to embrace, as together they sought justice and peace. He knew in his heart that the people making their own decision (even if it was a poor one) would give birth within them a newfound dignity.

This precious foundation was the first building block of justice and peace for the group. It was the first chapter of their story where they were the protagonists, and the friar was a supporting character. Together the group and the friar continued to write their story of liberation. When it became evident that the groups decision would not bring them to their desired goal, the friar gently helped them to learn from their choices. The next time they made a better decision and their story continued to grow in dignity and integrity.

When we recognize that JPIC is our Franciscan DNA, we view our ministries as belonging to the People of God, not us. We are the supporting characters, the ministers, in the story of God's kingdom breaking open into their lives, and ours as well. Such a perspective can help all who are ministers, as it did the Brazilian friar, to remember that sometimes "the better is the enemy of the good"! As Franciscans we do not greet people with words of peace and perfection. Instead, we offer peace and goodness as we help to write our part into the story of their lives.