

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO STUDENTS PARTICIPATING IN A MEETING
PROMOTED BY THE "SISTER NATURE" FOUNDATION**

*Paul VI Hall
Monday, 28 November 2011*

*Your Eminence,
Distinguished Authorities,
Dear Children and Young People,*

I welcome you with great joy at this meeting dedicated to your commitment to “Sister Nature”, to use the name of the Foundation that has sponsored it. I cordially greet Cardinal Rodríguez Maradiaga and thank him for his words to me also on your behalf, and for his gift of the precious facsimile of Codex 338 which contains the most ancient Franciscan sources.

I greet the President, Mr Roberto Leoni, as well as the authorities and important figures present and the numerous teachers and parents. However, above all I greet you, dear boys and girls, dear young people! It is precisely you I wanted to meet, and I would like to tell you that I deeply appreciate your decision to be “guardians of creation” and that you have my full support in this.

First of all we must remember that your Foundation and this meeting itself have a profoundly Franciscan inspiration. Besides, today’s date was chosen to commemorate the proclamation of St Francis of Assisi as Patron of ecology by my beloved Predecessor, John Paul II, in 1979. You all know that St Francis is also Patron of Italy. However, you may not know that it was Pope Pius XII who declared him such in 1939, when he described him as “the most Italian of saints and the saintliest of Italians”.

Thus if the Patron Saint of Italy is also the Patron of ecology, it seems right to me that young people and young Italians should have a special feeling for “Sister Nature” and busy themselves in actively defending her.

Indeed when one studies Italian literature one of the first texts found in the anthologies is the “Canticle of Brother Sun” or “of the Creatures” by St Francis of Assisi: “*Altissimo, onnipotente, bon Signore...!*” [Most high, all powerful, all good Lord]. This canticle sheds light on the proper place to give the Creator, the One who called the whole great symphony of creatures into existence: “*...Tue so’ le laude, la gloria e l’honore et onne benedictione.... Laudato sie, mi’ Signore, cum tucte le Tue creature*” [All praise is yours, all glory, all honour, and all blessings.... Be praised, my Lord, through all your creatures].

These verses rightly belong to your cultural and scholastic tradition. However, they are first and foremost a prayer that teaches the heart dialogue with God, teaches it to see in every created being the impression of the great heavenly Artist, as we also read in the most beautiful Psalm 19[18]: “The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.... There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard; yet their voice goes out through all the earth” (vv. 1: 4-5).

Friar Francis, faithful to Sacred Scripture, invites us to recognize nature as a stupendous book, that speaks to us of God, of his beauty and of his goodness. Only think that the “Poverello” of Assisi

always asked the friar of the convent in charge of the vegetable garden not to grow vegetables on all the land but to leave part of it for flowers, indeed to tend a beautiful flowerbed full of flowers so that passersby might raise their thoughts to God, the Creator of so many beautiful things (cf. *Vita secondo di Tommaso da Celano*, cXXIV, 165).

Dear friends, while the Church admires the most important scientific research and discoveries, she has never ceased to remember that in respecting the Creator's impression on the whole of creation, we understand better our true and deep human identity. If it is lived well, this respect can also help young men and women discover their personal talents and approaches and hence train for a specific profession which they will always seek to carry out with respect for the environment.

If, in fact, man forgets in his work that he is a collaborator of God, he can do violence to creation and cause untold damage that always has negative consequences, also on human beings, as we have unfortunately seen on various occasions.

Today, more than ever, it appears clear to us that respect for the environment cannot fail to recognize the value and inviolability of the human person in every phase of life and in every condition. Respect for the human being and respect for nature are one and the same, but they will both be able to develop and to reach their full dimension if we respect the Creator and his creature in the human being and in nature. In this regard, dear young people, I am certain that you are my allies, true "custodians of life and of Creation".

I would now also like to take this opportunity also to address a special word to the teachers and to the authorities present here. I would like to emphasize the great importance of education in this field of ecology too. I gladly agreed with the suggestion to hold this meeting because it involves such a large number of very young students and because it has a clear educational perspective. In fact, it is obvious by now that there will be no good future for humanity on earth unless we teach everyone a lifestyle that is more responsible towards creation.

And I underscore the importance of the word "creation" because the great and marvellous tree of life is not the fruit of a blind and irrational evolution. Rather, this evolution reflects the creative will of the Creator and his beauty and goodness. This style of responsibility is learned first of all at home and at school. I therefore encourage parents, heads of schools and teachers to undertake to pay constant educational and didactic attention to this aim. In addition, it is indispensable that the proper institutions — which are well represented here today — support families and schools in this endeavour.

Dear friends, let us entrust these thoughts and aspirations to the Virgin Mary, Mother of all humanity. As we have just begun the Season of Advent, she accompanies and guides us to recognize Christ as the centre of the cosmos, the light that illumines every person and every creature. St Francis, moreover, teaches us to sing, with all creation, a hymn of praise and thanksgiving to the heavenly Father, Giver of every gift. I warmly thank you for coming in such large numbers and I gladly accompany you with my blessing in your studies, your work and your commitment.

I spoke of singing, let us sing the Our Father together, the great prayer that Jesus taught us all.