

Astrid Tuuli Grace Determan (age 11)
Presentation at the Vatican

Three years ago I was honored to speak at the Gwich'in Gathering in Arctic Village, 120 miles above the Arctic Circle. In this place, the spiritual bond between the people and nature is everywhere. Gilbert, the revered tribal chief and spiritual leader at the Episcopal Church would call out individual villagers from the pulpit, "Sarah, David, remember when" he would say, and then proceed to tell stories of their daily interactions with the animals, all the while incorporating morals of the Bible. It was as if nature itself was the thing that proved and reaffirmed their beliefs.

The Patron Saint of Ecology, St. Francis of Assisi, taught us to LOVE GOD by loving his Creation. He too saw God in every wonderful tiny miracle of nature. Most of us, in fact, can't imagine our life without the exquisite works of God's Creation around us, telling us we are not alone. Yet we all know that our planet is in trouble. We have filled our air with CO₂, and we have cut down our forest. This is altering our climate with tragic consequences. We have neglected our brother and sister animals, too.

Right this very moment in Alaska, a spot the Gwich'in refer to as "*the sacred place where life begins*", oil companies are getting set to drill in the breeding grounds of the porcupine caribou. In Venezuela, unscrupulous mining is also causing ecological devastation in indigenous lands and destroying biodiversity. In Africa, industrial scale poaching is driving sentient elephants to extinction before our eyes. We have now killed off over half of earth's plant and animal species; shame on us for not stopping this yesterday.

We human beings are supposed to be the clever ones on the planet, yet, we are responsible for all this destruction. Why don't we learn and correct our errors? The wolves know better than us. Although they hunt, they actually benefit the caribou in the long run. They honor their earthly brothers and sisters, their instincts tell them to take care of their environment.

But animals do not have a voice in the human world. We must lend them ours - ALL of us human brothers and sisters - and not just adults. We children have a voice too, and we are learning to use it all around the world: in cities, rural areas, and in our First Nations communities where the suffering of our Mother Earth is so deeply felt.

The mission of my organization, EPIC-Animals, is to empower kids to speak up for animals and our environment and to translate our voice into lasting cultural, political, and institutional change. Even individually, our innocent voices can effect change. And together, we kids from all backgrounds are unstoppable! Just watch us as we touch the hearts and conscience of adults who otherwise would not listen.

And – FAITH -- can be the wind beneath our wings. Your religious communities must nurture us as responsible stewards of God's Creation. Once you have taught us how to observe, judge, and especially ACT in the public arena, we will then carry these principles to our parents and grandparents, so that they too protect Creation, so that we families of purpose demand environmental accountability of our leaders and businesses.

Just after Christmas my younger brother Sebastian and I had an extraordinary meeting with Cardinal Turkson. For nearly two hours we discussed elephant poaching, climate change, and the urgency to engage children in this process. I told him of my dream, inspired by Pope Francis, to plant the seeds of respect for nature—in the heart of every child and youth. Miraculously, Cardinal Turkson shared the exact same vision. We have written each other a lot since. He calls me his partner!

Well, today I have great, great news and the profound honor to announce that EPIC Animals will adapt LAUDATO SI for children and we will bring together kids from ALL FAITHS in the process. This will begin with an engaging virtual dialogue. Please do join us. Connect with me on our website EPIC-Animals.com or here today.

So now, I have an action to request of you. Let's create a "Caring for Creation" ministry in every house of worship. Let's make a place where all your flock learns to care for our common home - a place where children, in particular, will be taught the mechanics of civic responsibility, where they can address the congregation frequently, to gain confidence before engaging world leaders.

It's true... children should be free to play without a care in the world, instead of being concerned for our future—which does not look bright at the moment. Sadly, many adults in power have left us no choice. I assure you, kids the world over are already talking and addressing this devastation.

Please empower us further and have faith in us to lead. Kids have a unique capacity to think beyond what is and to IMAGINE WHAT WILL BE. I promise you, we kids will not stop until the Earth is healthy again, until God's creatures are no longer killed for their ivory, tusks, and fins—until indigenous peoples are free to restore their spiritual link to land and animals, until we live in peace again with Brothers Wind and Air and Mother Earth and a safe future is ensured for our descendants.

Patriarch Bartholomew words give us hope, "It is never too late" he says. "God's world has incredible healing powers; and human choices can change the tide in global warming. It is up to us to shape our future; it is up to us to choose our destiny."

Thank you for listening.