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The Canticle of the Creatures: A basis for a spirituality of matter for today

by Hilary Pearson TSSF

The Canticle expresses Saint Francis' approach to matter. He saw that all created things are interconnected and reflect God's love and goodness. Modern science also finds that matter is interconnected, reflecting for Christians the Trinitarian God whose overflowing love is the source of creation. Francis' positive view of matter, his understanding that creation can be a ladder to God, can be the basis of an attractive spirituality of matter for the twenty-first century.

Francis saw the interconnectedness of all creation because it all derives from the same source. He regarded all humans, rich and poor, Christians and Moslems, holy and sinful, as brothers and sisters because all are children of the same Heavenly Father. He extended the family circle to birds and other sentient creatures, giving them equal dignity with humanity in praising God and seeing their essential role in the manifestation of God in creation.

In the Canticle, Francis extends the inherent brotherhood and sisterhood of humanity to all creation, inanimate as well as sentient. Heavenly bodies, weather, water and fire are brought into the family. He celebrates creation as good and beautiful because it reflects the beauty and goodness of its Creator. The sun is expressly said to bear God's likeness, while the moon and stars are described as 'clear and precious and beautiful', attributes of God. Weather, water, fire and earth are seen as agents through whom God provides for humankind.

The Canticle introduces each creature with the refrain, 'praise to you, my Lord', followed by the word *per* which could be variously translated 'for', 'by' or 'through'. If 'for', Francis would be thanking God for these creatures, if it means 'by' Francis is bidding the creatures to praise their Creator. Translating *per* as 'through' means God is seen and praised through his creation. It is possible Francis intended all these layers of meaning.

The primary function of this good creation is to praise its Creator. In the alternative readings of *per*, this is praise by the creatures and praise by humankind through and for the creatures. There is a strong sense of the interconnectedness of all creation; the Canticle is like the Rublev icon of the Trinity in that it holds out an invitation to participate in a network of loving relationships which provides an underlying unity to everything that is.

The Canticle begins by acknowledging the transcendence of God; 'no one is worthy to mention your name'. This humble acceptance opens up creation as a way we can learn of and come to God. Celano says that Francis saw the beauty of God in things:

'Everywhere he followed the Beloved by the traces he has impressed on all things; he made for himself a ladder whereby he might reach the throne.' (2C 2.165).

God can be seen and understood through his creatures, which naturally leads to praise.

Can we today adopt Francis' spirituality formed in the medieval world-view? Can we adapt it to twenty-first century Western culture, strongly shaped by science and technology? The issue is not whether Francis anticipated modern science but whether the main themes of his spiritual approach to matter are sufficiently aligned to our contemporary world view to be a valid basis for a spirituality of matter for today.

Modern science agrees with his view that everything is interconnected. Chaos theory shows that the interactions of the individual units of a complex system lead to the emergence of coherent collective phenomena; 'the whole is more than the sum of its parts'. This dynamic state of interconnection also means that the behaviour of one unit of the system can have dramatic effects elsewhere, such as the famous 'butterfly effect', the possibility that a butterfly beating its wings in Brazil could lead to a tornado in Texas.

There is also interconnection at the most microscopic level of matter. For classical physics, the position and speed of an object were largely independent and could be measured. While this is still true for relatively large objects (like billiard balls), for elementary particles the uncertainty principle means that position and speed are connected. Even stranger, if two connected elementary particles are emitted and travel in different directions, each seems to 'know' if an observation is made on the other, a phenomenon called 'quantum entanglement'. Paul Davies in *God and the New Physics* says of the fundamental structure of matter: 'there is a strong holistic flavour to the quantum aspects of the nature of matter: interlocking levels of description with everything somehow made up of everything else and yet still displaying a hierarchy of structure.' (p.163) This could well be a summary of Francis' view of creation.

Francis was interested in creation not as a matter of curiosity but as the basis of spirituality, as a ladder to God. Can we today find a ladder to God through the Franciscan approach to matter? As Franciscans, we are challenged to look for the traces of God in the world revealed by modern science and to see in this world a reflection of the dynamic Trinity held in unity by love.

The popularity of New Age and similar spiritualities shows a hunger for something more than a purely rationalist 'scientific' explanation of the world and our place in it. Unfortunately, in the popular mind Christianity tends to be

associated with an ascetic, world-denying outlook which only values life after death. The Church has an opportunity in this century to rebalance this distorted view and to feed this spiritual hunger with the gospel of the Lord of Creation who came 'eating and drinking' (Matt. 11.19) and who spoke about flowers and birds. The Franciscan spirituality of matter can provide a basis for an attractive spirituality for today. Francis can once again preach to the ordinary people, dancing, singing and playing his imaginary violin. *f*

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