

franciscan - May 2003

© The Society of Saint Francis, 2003

Francis and Creation

by Nicholas Alan SSF

*Most High, all-powerful, good Lord,
yours are the praises, the glory, and the honour, and all blessing...*

So begins the Canticle of the Creatures, otherwise known as the Song of Brother Sun, Francis' song of creation. He composed it two years before he died, lying sick at San Damiano. It was winter and he was cold, his health was wrecked, his eyes were so painful that he could not even bear the light of day or a fire at night, and in the little cell of mats in which he lay so many mice were crawling over him that he was hardly able to sleep or say his prayers.

Crying out in desperation to the Lord he heard in his spirit of a great and precious treasure: the promise of God's kingdom. In response Francis soared into praise, and sang of the sun.

*Praised be you, my Lord, with all your creatures,
especially Sir Brother Sun,
.... he is beautiful and radiant with great splendour;
and bears a likeness of you, Most High One.*

The Canticle shows that for Francis God is honoured when we praise the creation. There is no jealousy here. Respect for the created world is a way of expressing respect for the one who is praised with all his creatures. Here Francis, the chivalrous knight of the Round Table, shows great courtesy as he honours Brother Sun, rejoicing in his beauty and splendour. Francis, as one made in God's likeness, shares these qualities with the sun in a kind of participation by joy.

A Franciscan theology of creation begins in the recognition of the essential goodness of all that God has made. Historically we can see in the Canticle a reaction against the heterodox Cathar teaching prevalent in Francis' day. This was a dualist doctrine that matter was an evil to be shunned in the pursuit of pure spirit. Francis was not blind to the ambivalence of the world in its fallen state, and often preached the hard discipline of penance in fasting, vigils and prayer; but his eremitic asceticism brought him closer to the natural world. The silence and solitude that he so often sought attuned his senses to a far greater awareness of the living, breathing, sustaining world in which he lived.

*Praised be you, my Lord, through Sister Moon and the stars,
in heaven you formed them clear and precious and beautiful.*

By alternating his praises with references to both brothers and sisters, Francis integrates the masculinity and femininity of creation. The basic triad of these opening verses comprises the Most High, the sun and the moon: God and the image of God, 'male and female he created them' (Gen.1:27). Perhaps there are echoes here of St. Clare in the word 'clear' (clarite), the bright moon with her sister stars, writing as he was in the grounds of San Damiano. But although Clare was for him both precious and beautiful, can we not say that by his relationship with her he was enabled to celebrate the femininity of creation itself? Brother Wind and 'every kind of weather' and Sister Water, 'useful and humble', remind us of a life spent on the roads, drinking from the brook beside the way. But they also show that Francis, travelling like the wind, is refreshed each day by his 'precious and chaste' Sister Water. In his prayers and dreams Francis returned again and again to images of ideal femininity such as Lady Poverty and the Blessed Virgin Mary. In this way was he not integrating the femininity of his own soul, coming to wholeness through prayer? In any case a creation theology necessarily celebrates both male and female, finding in their partnership the unitive way of salvation.

*Praised be you, my Lord, through Brother Fire,...
he is beautiful and playful and robust and strong.*

Because of his reverence for creatures, Francis expected to be treated kindly by them also. The Assisi Compilation states that 'his spirit was moved to so much piety and compassion towards [creatures] that he was disturbed when someone did not treat them decently' (AC 86). Francis treated all things, animate and inanimate, as living beings. When he was cauterised to cure his eyes, Francis asked the fire to be kind, remembering the love that he had always shown him. Francis radiated kindness, and all things responded to his open-hearted concern. Wild rabbits jumped into his lap, a ravenous wolf put its paw in his hand, birds flew on to his palm and sang. 'We who were with him saw him always in such joy, inwardly and outwardly, over all creatures, touching and looking at them, so that it seemed his spirit was no longer on earth but in heaven' (AC88). Francis created a relationship with all things, giving them his attention, speaking to them by name. The later friar John Duns Scotus, described this as seeing into the 'thisness' (*haecceitas*) of things, knowing their individual particularity in an intuitive rather than an abstract way. In this way all things are given a unique dignity, in a mutuality of obedience and respect.

*Praised be you, my Lord, through our Sister Mother Earth,
who sustains and governs us,
and who produces various fruit with coloured flowers and herbs.*

After the triad of the Most High, sun and moon, the Canticle has moved through the four elements of the material world in the medieval world-view: air and water, fire and earth. Mother Earth completes the cycle that began with Brother Sun, the image of the heavenly Father. Francis often exhorted creation itself to praise God as in the words of Psalm 148 and the Benedicite, the Song of the Three from the book of Daniel, which he would have recited so often in the Office. This is indeed the theme of his own sermon to the

birds. In the Canticle, however, his audience is more clearly the people around him and those to whom he went on mission. As he says in the Assisi Compilation: 'I want to write a new Praises of the Lord for his creatures, which we use every day, and without which we cannot live. Through them the human race greatly offends the Creator, and every day we are ungrateful for such great graces, because we do not praise, as we should, our Creator and the Giver of all good' (AC 83). We sometimes think it is a modern insight that we cannot live without the richness of creation. Francis knew this well, and his care for the creatures is rooted in a fundamental gratitude towards the Giver of all good.

With Francis we can proclaim the goodness of creation, which leads us into wholeness as we establish with all things relationships of kindness and respect. In this way thankfulness and joy are awoken within us and we can say with his tertiary follower Angela of Foligno:

In a vision I beheld the fullness of God in which I beheld and comprehended the whole of creation,... And in everything that I saw I could perceive nothing except the presence of the power of God, and in a manner totally indescribable. And my soul in an excess of wonder cried out, 'This world is pregnant with God!' *f*

Nicholas Alan SSF currently lives at the Friary at Glasshampton.