

Chapter 1

Introduction

One of the most lyrical and attractive accounts of the life of Saint Francis is that produced by Johannes Jörgensen in the early twentieth century. In his lovely first chapter he evokes the spell of Assisi and its surroundings in a language that is redolent of the high Romantic Movement because Johannes Jörgensen himself was very much part of that movement. The sounds, the colors and the atmosphere of that enchanting scene seem to emanate from his pages.

And so he would lie there, tired, but at peace, and look out on the blue cloudless autumn sky, listening to the splashing on the stones of the street as the people of the neighborhood threw their waste water out of the windows.if he raised himself up in the bed he could see the mountains under a blue veil on the other side of the plain, and soon the crimson evening red of the late autumn day burned in the western sky. As the darkness quickly fell, he heard the noise of the sheep, which were being driven bleating into the stable, and of the peasants and the peasant girls, who sang on their way home from the fields. (Jörgensen 1912:3).

One could ask, of course, if there is not something too romantic, too blissful about all this. Life in an Italian hill city at the end of the 12th century could be very harsh and even brutal. There was the constant struggle to produce enough food and the weather was not always kind. There were the cruel exactions of a feudal society in which the lords and their retainers took an enormous amount of what was produced. It was a society that could be very severe and unrelenting. And there was the incessant warfare that raged throughout Italy in those years, a warfare that brought Francis himself to a year of harsh imprisonment¹ in a dungeon in Perugia, and that made life very precarious and difficult for most of his contemporaries (Fortini 1981:151).

¹ Fortini (1981:151) notes that it was the Battle of Collestrada, 1202, in which Francis fought and was taken prisoner.

One of the best evocations I know of the bitter reality of those times, although the period covered is slightly later than that of Francis, is the Chronicle of Fra Salimbene. The cruelty, the savagery, the bitter reality of life in medieval Italy is made very clear in Salimbene's chronicle as he depicts the savage feuding and fighting that took place throughout his life in the cities and regions of Italy.²

For people with a very superficial knowledge of Francis he is seen as an engaging and endearing figure full of romantic sentiment and whimsical good nature, somewhat oblivious, it would seem, of the grim realities of life. He is pictured as a sort of romantic rebel, a kind of weird eccentric, a drop-out from the pressures of life. I suppose he appeals to that instinct because many of us yearn for a simpler more serene kind of life, where duties, responsibilities and the harsh burdens of daily living vanish.

One must however, question the picture of Francis as a romantic, an eccentric, a drop-out from society, a sentimental lover of flowers and animals. Surely there is more to Francis than this. He impressed the people of his own time, not as a superficial and wayward "Prince Charming" of creation, but as one who had found the source of wisdom and life. He seemed to them, in a well known phrase of Thomas of Celano, his first biographer, like a man from another world (*First Life* [=1C] 215).

Francis seems to have given a new type of presence to the world, one that was profoundly human as well as evangelical and cosmic. He fraternized with creatures and welcomed them as sisters and brothers (Hayes 1996:5). Francis's religious respect for all that existed and lived came from a great love of life that is related and united to that of the Creator for His work.

² In his Chronicle, Salimbene speaks of the fighting and unrest from the year 1212 to 1225, the year before Francis's death, and throughout most of the 13th century (Baird 1986:3-9).

According to Celano's, *The Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul* (2C), Francis was helped on his journey to God by what was in the world, using it as the "clearest mirror of goodness":

In Art he praises the Artist; whatever he discovers in creatures he guides to the Creator. He rejoices in all the works of the Lord's hands, And through their delightful display He gazes on their life-giving reason and cause. In beautiful things he discerns Beauty Itself; All good things cry out to him; 'The One who made us is the Best' (165).

Francis's acute sense of the presence of God in creation, and indeed in all human life, is one of the most significant marks of his spirituality (Hayes 1996:6). The extraordinary love that Francis brought to all creation flows from the fact that he entered into a respectful communion with it. Certainly there are many people who would be inspired by a magnificent sunset, but what separates Francis from them is the fact that Francis found beauty not only in the aesthetically pleasing things but also in things most of us overlook. Everything speaks to him of God and sends him back to God. In its unity and diversity creation is a sacrament of God, footprints that lead us to the Creator. "Following the footprints imprinted on creatures, he follows his Beloved everywhere; out of them all he makes for himself a ladder by which he might reach the Throne" (2 C 165).

The theme that I will explore in this study is that of Francis Bernardone's relationship with the universe. It is well known that Francis had the habit of referring to the sun, the moon, in fact to all creatures as sisters and brothers. However, I would like to ask what lay behind this way of thinking and talking. Was it something new in Christian sensibility and spirituality? Was Francis perhaps some kind of a prophet in this field of human awareness? One of the strange things about Francis of Assisi is the enormous appeal that he had, and continues to have for the modern age, ever since his "rediscovery" by Paul Sabatier.³

³ Paul Sabatier's (1941) study of Francis of Assisi had an enormous impact on Franciscan Studies by prompting scholars to develop a more critical and objective approach to the life of Francis and the sources. According to Armstrong, Hellamnn & Short, (1999: 22), a storm of scholarly and polemical response was provoked by Sabatier's interpretation of Francis as a "forerunner of the Protestant Reformation, a dissenter made to conform to the plans of the Roman Church":(22).

I have chosen to investigate the role of nature and the natural world in the spirituality and mysticism of Saint Francis of Assisi. I am aiming at a thorough investigation of medieval sources, taking a close look at what Francis himself has said about it, and examining the connection of stories passed down to us by his followers. I shall also examine contemporary studies of Francis's nature spirituality and mysticism.

1.1 The Basic Research Questions

My hypothesis is:

- a) that nature played a very prominent role in the spirituality and mysticism of Francis and was far more central to it than has often been realized;
- b) that the eremitical life was a major factor in Francis's refusal to accept other rules and life styles urged on him by the ministers;
- c) that Francis was neither a romantic, infatuated by nature nor a worshipper who deified nature but a sacramentalist with a thorough-going Theocentric and Christocentric understanding of nature.

Changing the idiom slightly I would say that my research is directed by three main questions:

- a) How important was nature in the spirituality and mysticism of Francis?
- b) Given that Francis spent at least half of every year as a hermit, how did that effect his spirituality?
- c) How valid is the popular image of Francis as a romantic in love with nature?
Was he perhaps even a worshipper of nature?

I propose to focus my research using these three questions as guidelines.

1.2 Research Methodology

The research methodology that I employ in this thesis is historical and theological. It is primarily a literature study in which I utilize both primary and secondary sources.

The primary and indispensable sources for Francis's spirituality are the early biographies by Celano and Bonaventure. I shall be drawing attention to the various ways in which these biographers handled their material. This can be quite revealing. Next in order is the collection of material, mostly stories and anecdotes gathered around the 1240's on the instruction of Crescentius of Jesi, Minister General of the Order. This collection, known as the *Assisi Compilation* (AC), is very large and of uneven quality, but a veritable gold mine of information about Francis and his early companions, and how they lived.⁴ Various other collections, such as *The Deeds of Blessed Francis and his Companions* (ABF), *The Mirror of Perfection* (1MP smaller version; 2MP larger version), and the *Little Flowers of St. Francis* (LFI) are largely based on the AC. This collection is extremely important because it has a kind of naïveté and freshness that are usually lost in formal biographies. I shall be very concerned to investigate this material for clues about Francis's spirituality of nature and his mysticism.

This aspect of my investigation is, of course, primarily historical and raises the usual problems of historical research, for example, time of composition, authorship, source criticism and redaction criticism. These problems are, in fact, very complex.

Later biographies of Saint Francis, of which the number is enormous, and the quality very varied, are mainly oriented to telling the story of his life. Some of them, like Englebert, Fortini and Manselli are very solid works of historical scholarship, and I have found them very helpful.

⁴ The problem of manuscripts and their dating complicates an answer to what has become known as the "Franciscan Question". A complicated debate revolves around this question which would take one far beyond the scope of this thesis. For a more detailed explanation of this see: Armstrong, Regis A., Hellmann, J.A. Wayne, & Short, William J. 1999. *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents: The Founder*. NY: New City Press, 62-64.

In such a work as this, it is clear that there must be a strong theological input. One could hardly discuss spirituality and mysticism without it, and of course, Saint Bonaventure took a very theological view of the founder of his Order. He saw him almost as a living icon, so to speak, of the whole Franciscan enterprise of seeking God and restoring and reconciling the world to God. As will become clear, nature figures very largely in this project. In fact, one scholar accuses Bonaventure of turning Francis into a wizard.

In my chapter on *The Canticle of the Creatures* (CtC), there will be ample scope for setting out Francis's Theocentric and Christocentric vision of nature and Bonaventure's thematization of this vision, both in his Major Legend (LMj) and in his *Journey of the Soul to God* (JS). Thus there is quite a strong theological dimension in this work.

More surprising perhaps is the philosophical element, which I have brought into this study. Theology has been described as philosophy applied to revelation and obviously the two greatest luminaries of the Franciscan school were great philosophers; Bonaventure and John Duns Scotus. In discussing spirituality and mysticism, I have found helpful ideas in William James, and Ludwig Wittgenstein. I have also drawn from a variety of literary works by authors, mainly English and American, in sympathy with nature and the spirituality and mysticism of nature.

My research methodology then, may be termed multidisciplinary, as I tried to grapple with my basic questions from several different points of view.

1.3 Review of Literature

The subject of my investigation, the spirituality and mysticism of nature in the early Franciscan tradition, has by no means gone unnoticed in the multitudinous writings about the saint of Assisi. My purpose here is to offer a review of the literature on this subject.

The primary and indispensable literature is, of course the *Writings of Francis*, the early biographies and the legends of Saint Francis that have been very well collected and edited in under the title *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*. This collection is both comprehensive and authoritative. I have found it, and its accompanying index invaluable for my work.

Among the many biographers of Saint Francis, I would single out Arnaldo Fortini (1981) for the enormous light he shed on the times and the milieu in which Francis lived. He was especially helpful when I was dealing with the places of Francis.

Nearly every biographer of Saint Francis has noticed his love of nature, but only a few works have been devoted to a formal study of the role of nature in his life. One of these which I have found very useful and inspiring is by Edward A. Armstrong (1973), *Saint. Francis: nature mystic: the derivation and significance of the nature stories in the Franciscan legend*. When I studied the book I found that the subtitle was far more accurate in indicating its contents. Armstrong is very knowledgeable about folklore and legend and uses this knowledge very affectively in his study. He has also published books on ornithology, the study of birds, and natural history, and he is able to correct some of the details of stories told by Celano and others. He does not have very much to say about the nature mysticism of Francis, as Roger D. Sorrell(1988) pointed out in his study of *Saint Francis and Nature*. It is worth quoting Sorrell on this matter:

The reader may assume that nature mysticism, being an interesting issue, has been much studied, and that Edward A. Armstrong's book, *St. Francis: Nature Mystic*, must have already dealt with the topic adequately. Both of these assumptions are, unfortunately, quite incorrect. Research on nature mysticism per se is still at the groundbreaking level (:79n).

Sorrel himself, I found to be stimulating and enlightening on the topic of mysticism, but as he acknowledged, the topic is still at an early stage. I could not agree with him that the famous experience of Saint Augustine and his mother, Monica at Ostia was an example of nature mysticism because I do not see that it arose from the contemplation of nature (:88).

From Sorrell I received some valuable pointers as regards the literature on mysticism and Saint Francis. He praised especially the article by Ewert Cousins: *Francis of Assisi: Christian mysticism at the crossroads* (1983:163-190) which he describes as a fundamental contribution to the study of mysticism in Saint Francis (Sorrell 1988:79). This article is found in the book *Mysticism and religious traditions* (1983), edited by Stephen Katz. Other sources consulted were William James (1902), *Varieties of Religious Experience*, Auguste Poulain (1978), *The graces of interior prayer*, and Eric Doyle (1980), *Saint Francis and the song of the brotherhood*. A relatively modern account of religious experience that I have found very helpful is *Exploring inner space: is God still possible in the 20th century*, by David Hay (1982), in which he gives a good survey of work on religious experience, including an account of his own research. For the theological background of mysticism I relied on the works of William Johnston, especially his *Mystical theology: the science of love* (1995). The articles on mysticism by Celia Kourie (1992; 1998) and those in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality* edited by Michael Downey (1993) were also helpful in my discussion of mysticism.

On the topic of spirituality, which is closely related to mysticism, of course, I found a good deal of help in the series of *World spirituality: an encyclopedic history of the religious quest*, edited by Ewert Cousins. The volumes on Christian spirituality in this series were especially helpful. Other general works consulted were various volumes of the series *Classics of Western spirituality*.

On particular Franciscan topics, I found some very helpful material in the volumes of *Franciscan studies*, *Greyfriars review*, *Archivum Franciscanum historicum*, and *The Cord*. Particularly helpful, of course, were books and articles by notable Franciscan authors, namely, Eric Doyle (1980;1983;1998), Ilia Delio(1996;1998;1999;2001;2003), Zachary Hayes (1992;1996;1998), and Kenan Osborne (1994;1995;2003). These are listed in my bibliography.

1.4 Plan of the Thesis

For this project of investigating the spirituality and mysticism of nature in the early Franciscan tradition, the first task to be undertaken is to investigate the complex area of spirituality and to situate my own research within the general area of human spirituality, and then within the more specific area of Christian spirituality. That is the main concern of the first part of my second chapter.

I am concerned to point out in the first place that any form of human life, even one that might be hostile to religion can be viewed as having a spirituality, even if it be very attenuated. Spirituality is, in general, an approach to the divine or the holy, a way of living in relation to that, a striving to live one's life in view of the divine or the holy. That way of expressing things is sufficiently broad to embrace most forms of spirituality encountered in human life.

Franciscan spirituality however, belongs to the genus of Christian spirituality, and in trying to clarify its specific nature I shall contrast it with a variety of approaches to God found in Christian spirituality. Thus, one comes to talk of various Christian spiritualities defined mainly in terms of the conditions and ways of living of their practitioners. In order to amplify this notion of spiritualities I shall consider briefly the notion of monastic spirituality in general and the individual differences found in it when one considers the individual functions people have within a monastery, for example, the abbot, bursar, guest master teacher and others.

I shall contrast that with the spirituality of the hermit, because this is clearly relevant to the life of Francis. He spent significant periods in solitude and wrote a *Rule for Hermitages* (RH). Solitary life would continue to be an important component for Franciscan life (Mertens 1995:139-140). Francis's love of the eremitical life (LMj 12:2) provided a great challenge to his

followers since their kind of presence to the world took a great variety of forms, as they tried to follow out the injunction given to Francis “Go and Repair my Church”.

Following these remarks on the eremitical life I shall consider briefly lay spirituality because that is also a very important part in Franciscan spirituality, never more than at the present time. In Francis of Assisi’s *Second letter to the faithful* (2LtF) he traces out the normal Christian way of life. The heights to which this leads are accessible to everyone (Matura 1997:41). The aim in this section is to attain a comprehensive and well founded view of Christian spirituality so that Francis’s own spirituality can be seen more clearly within the whole spectrum of Christian spirituality. I think it is fair to say that, at present, we are witnessing the flowering of a great movement in spirituality and that the whole discipline is being developed in an unprecedented way.

The second part of the second chapter is devoted to the concept of nature mysticism. This is crucial for my first guideline question. I approach it by trying to clarify the nature of mysticism in the light of history and of contemporary thought. Mysticism is a felt awareness and knowledge of the presence of the holy, the divine, of God in the life of one who is called a mystic. In mysticism one is dealing with states of mind or consciousness, not with organizing the practical condition of living as in spirituality.

Opinion has varied greatly about mysticism. Some consider it to be very near to the lives of ordinary people, at least from time to time, while others suppose it to be restricted to a very few chosen souls (Wiseman 1993:682). I am inclined to the former view myself and believe that mysticism is quite close to the everyday. I was glad to find that William Johnston (2000:83) holds a similar view. As I indicate, I have also found support for this in the American philosopher, William James (1943:9), and in the research of David Hay (1982:148).

After clarification of the terms mysticism and contemplation, I will turn to nature mysticism and what is meant by it. I will try to clarify this concept by adducing from a variety of sources some experiences which can be clearly recognized as belonging to nature mysticism and I will quote a text from Thomas of Celano which clearly indicates that Francis was a nature mystic, and that he regarded nature as a sacramental system, signifying and revealing the presence of the Creator.

In the third chapter, I will examine the places that were special to Francis in his life's journey. The Carceri will be dealt with first because it was so intimately connected with his conversion. Austere, grim, forbidding, the place has still a strange wild charm, and Francis was clearly drawn to such places. In some way, they are a mirror of his world as he sought the Most High God. Next, I will consider the Portiuncula, which has a fair claim to be called Francis's most favored place, a gentle place, very different to the Carceri, but in his time it was secluded and uninhabited.

LaVerna, the mountain of God in the Franciscan tradition will be considered next, and then in turn Greccio and Fonte Colombo in the Rieti Valley, and finally San Francesco del Deserto in the Venetian Lagoon. I shall conclude with some reflections on the curious relationship between wilderness and the city in the life of Francis.

After considering these places favored by Saint Francis, I shall turn to the elements of the universe and the creatures that dwell in our world. I shall begin with the sun, moon and stars, and move on to consider the elements of the sub lunar world, earth, water, air and fire. Then I shall look at growing things, herbs, colored flowers and fruit, and the world of animals, wild and tame, fish and birds, and examine the stores about these in the early tradition and see what they have to tell us about the spirituality of Francis.

CtC is the subject of my next chapter. CtC has attained a very high place in the Franciscan tradition and it is regarded as the apex of Francis's own poetical compositions. In view of its importance I shall examine carefully the circumstances of its composition, and study it closely stanza by stanza, no easy task in view of the plethora of commentary on this work.

After the chapter on the CtC, I will try and gather the fruits of this extensive study. This will involve an extended discussion of Francis's nature mysticism and also of his nature spirituality. Here again, I shall be guided by the basic questions about the importance of nature in his spirituality and mysticism. The overwhelming affect of his eremitical life style and the profoundly Theocentric and Christocentric nature of life.

In a concluding chapter I shall look to the present time, and make some suggestions about resacralizing our attitude to nature, drawing inspiration from Francis. In particular I shall try to deal with Francis as the patron of ecology and delineate the tasks that lie ahead as we try to cope with the enormous crises in ecology that confront us at the present time.

An examination of the medieval and modern sources reveals the prophetic quality of Francis's response to nature. A comparable response has not found expression until the late 20th century when theologians began writing what is called eco-theology.

I shall now proceed to the examination of the concepts of spirituality and mysticism which constitute the main structure of this thesis.